

DESERT BREW

B. M. BOWER



Elleanor S. Lewis
Walton
Oregon

DESERT BREW

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BY

B. M. BOWER

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CHAPTER ONE

THE DESERT CALLS

And the lean kioty yaps at the dawn,
And the stars grow pale as the day comes on,
And the dust devil dances in devilish glee
Where the sightless skull grins vacantly
By the bones sun-bleached in the sand.

THE guest of honor closed his latest volume of desert verse and bowed with a faint smile for the club president. He sat down, exhaling a breath of relief carefully through his nostrils. White kid gloves spatted well-bred applause. The president rose and moved papers idly upon the desk while she groped for a graceful phrasing of her proposal that the club offer the guest of honor a rising vote of thanks. The president was acutely conscious of new slippers, subconsciously calculating the excruciating half-hours until she might feel the heavenly relaxation of her oldest bedroom sandals in the sacred privacy of her own room. Squarely in front of her stood a scraggy branch of desert sage, flanked on either side by a purple blooming cactus and a yellow, silent tributes to the reception committee's desire to pay the guest a pretty compliment. The president bit into the inner side of her under lip, smiled down upon the small sea of Easter millinery with attentive eyes staring from under the hats in pairs of varying hue and expression, and smiled.

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"When I have cleared the dust and the drought from my mental throat, flung there by the grim realism of our master poet," she began, and was thankful that the words came so easily to her lips. It was the game.

The poet's eyes went again to the decorations of sage and cactus. What in thunder did they bring that stuff into this sophisticated room for? It was out of place. It looked dragged in. It looked about as he felt, as he must look, here before all these women who didn't care a hang about the desert, or about his verses. They had taken that last one without batting an eye — and they must know it was rotten. Grim realism! Hunh. Oh, well — A small tidal wave of smartly gowned women rose engulfingly before him. His social training reacted automatically to the cue. It was the game.

A couple of hundred women — and two or three meek men — pressed forward to greet Woods Morgan who stood head and shoulders above the eyes that smiled up into his. The voice that gave half the charm to his readings made an effective undernote in the humming of many voices pitched to the social key. Woods Morgan was so satisfying as a club guest! He could always be depended upon to say just the right thing, to make a lot of people feel pleased with themselves and with him. As he stood later, sipping tea in a gentle whirlpool of admiring femininity and speaking pleasant trivialities to this one and to that, remembering names with an uncanny sureness, giving to each

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woman a dazzling moment of flattering interest, not one of the two hundred guessed how he hated himself and them at that moment. Nor that their desert decorations had upon his imagination the effect of a spur jabbed into the flank of a restive horse.

He made his way to the side of the club president and gave convincing reasons why he must go. There was an appointment — he had tried to postpone it, but the man was leaving the city on the six o'clock train and there was barely time now to catch him — and would she forgive him if he ducked out? She would, gladly and thankfully, but she would not tell him that. She could have kissed him for cutting short the dawdling and chatter, but she looked sorry, and thanked him again very prettily and convincingly for his kindness in coming.

She would have thought him an awful liar if she had seen him half an hour later. Half naked in a hired bathing suit, he lay on the flat of his back, inert, rocking gently as the water heaved beneath him, out beyond the first line of breakers at Venice. Gulls wheeled and dipped and screamed down at him as he floated and muttered disjointed sentences that were nothing more than the mental spindrift blown off the mood that had seized him there in the club room. Instinct for empty spaces and solitude had driven him straight to the ocean, which is not unlike the desert in some of its attributes and in emergencies may be made to satisfy temporarily that soul hunger which the city breeds in men of a certain type.

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"Fine, fat-headed fool you are," he gritted alliteratively, as he paddled with his hands like flippers, to keep himself out of the rollers. "Great hulk — stand up and read your own drivel — your own — *drivel*, damn it! Rotten stuff. All of it. Sickening. Tea with lemon, you bald-faced monkey! Pity the desert can't fight back. It ought to take *you* and bleach your damn' bones for you."

Floating half-submerged like a six-foot length of log, he rested his hands and let the heave of a billow carry him smoothly into the slow pound of the breakers. He turned lazily upon his belly, sent himself forward with a crawling stroke or two and permitted himself to be spewed upon the wet sand. Too bad. Much as one would like to do it, one can't remain forever upon the water. If it were desert, now ——— Once more the pungent smell of sage was in his nostrils, quite obliterating in his consciousness the salty, dank odor of kelp. He dug bare toes into the wet slope, drew himself up the beach to where the sand was dry and gratefully warm under the slant rays of the hot April sun and threw himself face down upon his folded arms to dream. Lying, with the sun warm on his back, he could forget that he was not in the desert with miles of emptiness between himself and any other soul. He could drug himself pleasantly with visions of his own conjuring, and for a time not to be counted by the clock he could be content.

A small boy swinging a bucket and shovel that had cost his mother a dime, with sand on his knees and

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shins and a wicked little twinkle in his eyes, came up and inspected the poet's long, supine body calculatingly, cast questing glances up and down the beach and knelt and began to ply his shovel furiously. His mother would have been pleasantly excited at the sight of him industriously scooping warm sand over the bare legs of Woods Morgan of new and glittering fame; but she lay asleep under a huge red umbrella and missed the pride she might have known. Woods Morgan lay still and let the small human badger dig. He liked the warm weight on his limbs and body, and the trickling rivulets of sand down his sides. The measured beat and swash of the breakers lulled his unrest. Passers-by fancied him asleep and he could dream undisturbed.

Having heaped him over like a new grave, leaving only his head and shoulders free, the small boy found another interest and took himself and his shovel elsewhere. The poet was drowsily picturing a high, barren valley he knew, rimmed with broken hills of amethyst shadows in the distance, when a girl spoke abruptly beside him.

"Still sulking, are you? Well, I've cooled down and thought things over, and I've made up my mind that I simply won't marry you, and that's all there is to it."

Woods shifted his head on his arms until he could peer with one eye between them. Within this narrow field of vision appeared a rounded, bare knee slightly sunburned and with a dimple in the side next his face.

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Even a disgruntled author who has gone stale at his work and easy living may be classed as human, I suppose. Woods looked at the dimple and forgot to correct the girl's mistake in his identity.

"I suppose you thought I'd do that sweet Alice stuff again and 'laugh with delight when you give me a smile, and tremble with fear at your frown', but you've played that record for the very last time in my presence, I'd have you know. I'm no sweet Alice, and there are plenty of other fellows in this town who drive a mean car and know how to put on a party. No man living can tell *me* I'm marrying his check book, and you did say that very thing and you can't smooth things over by denying it. I hate the very sight of you. Here's your darned old ring."

A small object dropped into the astonished young man's half-open palm as the girl sprang up and ran off down the beach toward the plunge. She was gone before Woods Morgan could heave himself up from under the piled sand and call to her through cupped hands, and a derisive, farewell wave of her arm was her only answer to his hail. Woods took after her, running at top speed, but the slight figure in the dark red bathing suit and the bright red silk bandanna disappeared through the little doorway fifteen seconds or so ahead of him.

Two hundred women who had lately listened to his suave reading of his own verse would have craned necks in absorbed interest at the way their pet poet ranged up and down the dank passage and out into

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the echoing space of the plunge where a few bathers splashed and spouted like decorous sea lions. Heads turned as it was when the gaunt figure in the sagged bathing suit went by, his eyes roving here and there, eagerly seeking, his left hand clenched into a fist; but not the head of the girl who had said her say and run off, womanlike, before she must listen to a reply.

Woods Morgan finally gave up and retreated to his own little cubicle in the row of weedy-smelling dressing rooms. Within the bare cell he opened his hand and stared at the trinket thrust upon him. Of course it was a diamond ring, since it had symbolized the betrothal of a girl to a young man whose check book had become a bone of contention between them; a particular young man, who chose his jewels with care. Woods was no diamond expert, but he had bought a diamond or two in his time and he had gazed upon others with intelligent approbation. A two-carat stone, if it was a point, he guessed the one in his hand. A big, beautiful, blue-white diamond, flawlessly reflecting hidden lights in the gloom. Woods turned it this way and that, mentally likening it to a prisoned star. The richly engraved platinum, beautiful though it was, did not interest him except as a means of identification. It should be easy to trace a ring of that kind, he thought, as he peeled off his bathing suit, his glance still going to the ring carefully placed on the narrow shelf.

"A ring, a voice and a sunburned, dimpled knee," he murmured, whimsically giving the sentence the ca-

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dence of a line of verse. "I could write a story around that—if I had a plot that would stand up alone, and didn't have to do desert stuff and wasn't sick of the city." He drew the tip of his tongue reflectively along his salty underlip. "I can trace the ring through the jewelers, I reckon. — Funny — a man wouldn't dare try to put a thing like that over in a story: Girl runs up, hands a strange young man her diamond ring and a sizzling call-down and runs off before he can get his face open — nh-nh! Couldn't make that go down. — Nice voice, give it pleasant things to say."

He was giving the last turn to his tie when he grinned suddenly, like a boy. His eyes lighted as they had not done in a month. He picked up the ring and tilted it back and forth again, watching it flash, his thoughts with the girl who had worn it.

"Little and slim, and she ran off as free and graceful as a kid. I'll bet she's sorry. Women are, when they have blown up their bridges. Bet those tears have got past her lashes, by now. I'll have to tell that to Sikes. He can write a corking love story around that. Out of my line, though. Still — a mystery story, if it were properly worked up ——"

While he advertised in all the daily papers, and tramped from one jeweler to another, Woods Morgan played with the romance and the mystery faintly suggested by the incident. But he did not tell his friend "Sikes", nor did he succeed in weaving a plot of his

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own. He was at that point of mental depression where plots refused to come forth from his sluggish imagination, and moreover, he had other plans and specifications for his summer's work and lacked only the proper environment and material. For that he must go to the land of Joshua trees and dust devils and general barrenness. It would take more than one diamond ring dropped into his palm to hold him to the city, he told himself, while he sorted and packed his belongings. For that matter it would take more than one dimpled knee and one voice to hold his interest for long.

He called upon all the reputable jewelers in the city and he ran his advertisements for a month in the Personal columns, and he visited the beach as often as weather and his many engagements permitted. After that he did not know what more he could do, and so he presently found himself bored with the mystery and ready to let chance return the ring to the girl if it would. The only difference it made was a delay of three weeks in his departure, because he was a fairly honest young man and the first jeweler he consulted told him that the ring was easily worth twelve hundred dollars. I give the incident chiefly to account for that delay which did alter events for Woods Morgan; as we shall presently see.

CHAPTER TWO

WOODS MORGAN ANSWERS

THE postmaster at Gold Center lifted his hand toward the pigeonhole marked W, turned again to stare and pulled out four letters.

"Did you say Williams?" He fingered two letters whose flaps were messy as if they had not been held altogether inviolate since leaving the hand of the writer.

"I did not. I said William Woods; or Bill Woods, or plain W. Woods. I don't suppose there's anything for me." Woods Morgan, who had dropped his last name at the desk of his club, lest it prove to be burdensome in this particular quest of his, pulled his old briar pipe from his pocket and poured in tobacco from a flat can, the corners of his bearded lips twitching with amusement.

"You said Williams at first. Here's two letters been laying here for W. Williams. Sure they ain't for you?"

"Afraid I can't use any Williams mail to-day, thank you." Woods grinned and moved to one side, depositing a burnt match in the coal hod that seemed to be doing a summer shift as wastebasket. "Here, let me take a look at those Williams letters," he reconsidered. There was the possibility that there had been a mistake made in readdressing his letters, though that was not likely. Woods Morgan always became plain

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William Woods when he went into the desert after the stuff stories and poems are made of, and his mail had never gone wrong. He glanced now at the letters and shook his head, the postmaster eyeing him with suspicion.

"You don't happen to have any mail for Hawkins, do you? H. E. Hawkins."

The postmaster looked from the Williams letters to the keen, Vandyke-bearded face of Woods and reluctantly put the letters back. Funny a man should change his mind so often about his name!

"Letter for Hawkins bin layin' here for a month, pretty near. Want it?"

"No, I merely wanted to know if Hank had got his mail. You know him, don't you? Picturesque old prospector with a couple of burros. Looks like an apostle."

"Don't know him. Feller took out a bill of grub yesterday, but he was a Swede. Name of Oleson. You wouldn't mean him, I s'pose."

Woods lifted his hands even with his hat brim, shook his head and walked out of the store. He sat down on the high platform that served as both porch and sidewalk, swung his long legs over the edge and smoked and stared at the conglomerate hills beyond the station. Presently the postmaster — a substitute, by the way — sauntered out and stood with his hands in his pockets.

"This feller Hawkins — you wasn't lookin' fer him, was you?"

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"I expect to begin if he doesn't show up here by to-morrow." Woods cocked a speculative eye up at the man. "Hank located some claims for me, two years ago. I grubstaked him, as a matter of fact. He was to meet me here and take me out to the mine. Anything funny in that?"

"No-o, not to me, there ain't." The postmaster let himself down to the edge of the platform and dangled his legs loosely. "If it's any of my business, whereabouts are them claims?"

"It isn't, but they're back here in the hills." Woods tilted his head vaguely toward the west.

"In the Grape Vines, ay?" The postmaster gave him a swift, sidelong look.

"Maybe." Woods remembered abruptly that he actually did not know just where the claims were located. He had been more interested in the man than in the mine, but he could scarcely explain that attitude; not to the postmaster, at least.

"Funny name for mountains," he said quizzically. "I wonder if they ever had a vine there!"

"What 'n hell 'd they want with a vine?" The postmaster countered belligerently.

"They might want to grow a grape."

The postmaster stared at him, scowling suspiciously. He grunted as if the effort of speech were not justified and looked away.

"Who would be likely to know old Hank Hawkins?"

"I dunno as anybody would." The postmaster

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chewed deliberately the three sticks of gum he had slid into his mouth.

"That old man tinkering with the wagon over there looks like one of these old-timers who knows everybody. I believe I'll go talk with him."

"You can't. He's deaf. Got both eardrums busted in a mine." The postmaster chewed with his mouth open and a squeaking of the gum between his teeth. "He couldn't hear the crack uh doom."

"Interesting." Woods slid off the platform. "I never talked with a man who had lost both eardrums."

He walked leisurely across the road and a littered plot of ground to where the old man was working with his back turned. While yet a rod or two away Woods stepped to one side and deliberately kicked an empty coal-oil can that had lodged against a bush in some gust of wind. The old man started and looked around, and Woods smiled to himself, wondering why the postmaster had lied.

"Looks funny to see a man tinkering with a wagon, these days. Cleaning spark plugs?"

"What say?" The old fellow tilted his head to one side and blinked up at Woods. "You'll have to speak a little louder, mister. I'm kinda hard of hearing. Lookin' fer somebody?"

"Hank Hawkins." Woods leaned and spoke into the greasy palm cupped behind the old man's right ear.

"Hawk? Glad to meet yuh, Mr. Hawk. My name's Brown. Stayin' here long?"

Woods Morgan shifted his pipe back into his mouth,

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drew his notebook from his pocket and wrote upon an empty page:

"Call me Bill Woods. I'm looking for Hank Hawkins. Do you know him?"

The old man watched him, read the message distastefully and glared up at Woods, working his toothless gums with a violent chewing motion.

"Why didn't yuh say your right name fust? Go around with your mouth full uh mush — mumblin' so a feller can't make nothin' out! What yuh want of Hank Hawkins? Snoopin' around tryin' to find out somethin', ay? Dang deetectiff, I s'pose. Well, you git! Hank ain't here and he ain't been here. Don't know 'im. Never heard of sech a feller. No use tryin' to pump *me*! This town ain't got nothin' to hide — and it don't want no snoopers hangin' around, neither! You git, 'fore you're got — that there's my advice, mister!" He chewed and glared, then turned back to his work. The corded old hand that held the monkey wrench shook so that the tool rattled all around a rusty bolt without taking hold.

Woods laughed, glancing over his shoulder toward the store.

"Hank has some good claims back in the Grape Vines, hasn't he?"

"Grape Vines?" The old fellow jumped as if he had been hit. "Tryin' to pump *me*, ay? You git! I dunno nothin' about it, I tell yuh!"

Woods walked away, his hands in his pockets, his pipestem clamped between his teeth. Over at the store

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platform the postmaster was talking earnestly to a man who had strolled up and was standing with his elbows on the rough planking. They glanced often toward Woods as they talked. A shack window across the road framed the weathered face of a woman who dodged back when Woods looked her way.

"Seems to be some mystery about this town," he mused. "Might dig out the makings of a good story if I had time and could get some one to talk. Moonshiners, maybe. But that field is overworked already. Better stick to Hank and the old boom days."

There is, you must know, a kind of prospecting which is not much talked of outside the clan of fiction builders. Just as men hunt for gold and endure much in the seeking, the writer folk go here and there and everywhere, hunting plots for stories; material fresh to the pages of fiction magazines; fields as yet untouched by other tellers of tales. It may be telling secrets, but there are some who know how a man will sail the seven seas and count himself lucky if he can bring back fresh tales of far countries. He will guard his new field as jealously as any prospector guards the secret of a new strike. To the writer, new material is a gold mine. He may some day dig a best-seller out of his discovery — he counts on digging out better stories than the other fellow has written.

Woods Morgan had discovered that Hank was a mine of picturesque reminiscence, spinning yarn after yarn of the early days in the desert country. They might not be true yarns, but they were mighty good

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story stuff nevertheless, and Woods could count on getting plots enough to keep him going for a year, at least. He needed plots. With a freshly signed contract for fifteen short stories and two novels of the desert to fill, he hadn't an original idea in his head. Writers do go stale at their work. That's why they must one day choose between grinding out hackneyed stuff or getting out where men are pulling fresh fabric from the loom of fate. That is why Woods Morgan slipped into plain Bill Woods and went to meet Hank Hawkins in Gold Center. Not for sake of the claims but because he wanted the hours beside the campfire with garrulous old Hank squinting at him through the smoke and yarning about old times.

He had meant to worm a plot out of Gold Center while he waited for Hank, but that was impossible now. For some unknown reason Gold Center had withdrawn into its shell like any desert turtle and peered at him with hostile eyes. He saw two boys giggling and pulling at their chins as if they were smoothing whiskers, and knew that they were making fun of his Vandyke beard which he prized for the smart, professional look it gave to his otherwise humorous countenance. He went into the shabby pool hall and knocked the balls around, making some very clever shots that got him no attention whatever from the two or three idlers there. So presently he went out and hunted up some one who would sell him a couple of saddle horses.

That afternoon he outfitted at the store, where he

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was conscious all the while of the latent animosity of the postmaster and clerk, and the next morning he rode away from Gold Center to find out if he could what had become of Hank Hawkins. His old gray Stetson, held sacred to the character of Bill Woods out stalking story material for Woods Morgan, was tilted at a reckless angle to shade his cheek from the hot sun of late morning. His old briar pipe was clenched between his teeth, his legs hung straight to the stirrups like the cowpuncher he would like to have been.

He was content. He was riding into the hills for which he had hungered in the town, straight into the land of enchantment where the red gods press to the lips of men the potion that breeds forgetfulness of the world beyond the mountains.

CHAPTER THREE

NOT A TYPEWRITER ADVENTURE

"*YES, I have no bonanza!*" sang Bill Woods, paraphrasing more foolishly than his editors would have believed possible since the work of Woods Morgan was distinguished by its grimness. "*Yes-s! I have no ——*" He turned in the saddle and looked back. He did not know why he should have felt all at once that another rode behind him on the trail, but the impression was keen enough to hold him there on the crest of a narrow ridge while he scanned as much of the path down the slope as lay revealed.

"Nerves," he explained the conviction away in a tone of mild disgust. "By gosh, I didn't know I'd come to that!"

He prodded his brown horse in the flank with his unspurred heel as a hint to proceed, and pulled the slack out of the new lead-rope that compelled the reluctant sorrel to follow him with the heavy pack. They went on, but Bill Woods forgot that he had been singing a foolish ditty in a very foolish way. A little while back, before he had burst into melody of a sort, he had likened himself to an Argentine ant trying to crawl over a herd of dead elephants and wandering up and down and around in a maze of dry creases in the hide. Now he thought of it again as he gazed ahead at the hopeless jumble of peaks, ravines, long bare ridges and abrupt little gulches breaking through.

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Vague discomfort nagged against the back of his mind. On the next slope the brown horse twitched ears forward and back, sidled and half turned to stare back down the trail. It was not a good place for twitchings and sidlings, and Woods kicked him out of the notion and consciously refrained from turning frankly to look. It was not improbable, he told himself, that another rode that way. The trail wouldn't be there if men never traveled into the Grape Vines, and while a fellow being was neither wanted nor needed just then, there was no valid reason for objecting to the presence of a stranger. There was, he told himself whimsically, plenty of trail, measured lengthwise, and enough wilderness to go around if the other fellow wasn't a hog.

A bit later he pulled up to fill and light his pipe. He had not smoked for an hour or two. He took his time about it, enjoying the wild beauty of the hills, pausing now and then to gaze; unconsciously pretending to himself that it was the view which pulled his eyes toward the east. That his glance dropped seekingly to the trail behind him meant nothing more than a mild curiosity. The brown horse thought he heard something, that was sure. The sorrel dropped his head in a brief doze. When his pipe was going, Woods rode on. He had seen no one, heard nothing.

The stillness of that high solitude pressed his mood down to a thoughtful silence. The air was quiet, the sun hot, even the stone crickets flat and listless in their strident song. The odor of the sweating horses set

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him to dreaming of swift adventure. He loitered, giving them plenty of breathing spells after each climb, conscious of waiting to be overtaken by him who came up that trail where his horse's hoof tracks lay unblurred by any breeze.

Toward noon the trail dipped steeply into a sterile basin where water stood in a rock-lipped pool; a tank, the desert men call such a natural reservoir of surface water. It looked clear and cool, and Bill Woods dismounted and drank his fill before he let the ponies come near it. He watched them sink eager muzzles halfway to the eyes before they snorted and drank with dainty surface sips, one foreleg curved, ears working, as each swallow slid visibly down their eager gullets under the sweaty hair. It was great. He could write a poem on the way horses go down to a pool and drink.

He pulled off saddle and pack, careless of the extra work it gave him, hung new nosebags with a double handful of rolled barley in each over their ears. He talked to them, making friends. Then, yielding to the impulse that was growing more urgent, he got his gun from the pack; a Luger that had brought meat to his supper fire on many a trip into the wild. That he had not weighted his body with the weapon when he took the trail told how well he knew the desert hills, and even now he was almost shamefaced as he slid it inside his waistband and climbed back to the ridge they had just left, and crouched there behind a ledge.

After a while he returned to where the horses were

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tossing the bags in hope of catching a last flake of barley in their lips. He sat down on the edge of the tank where he could watch the back trail and ate a couple of hotel sandwiches. He was puzzled. He could not account for that feeling of being followed. A traveler would not slink along behind, yet he had given time to catch him.

Unable to guess who could be spying upon him there, Woods decided that his nerves—though he hadn't realized that he owned nerves—were beginning to play tricks on him. He repacked the big sorrel, saddled the brown horse and rode on, smoking his pipe for company. He was conscious of the Luger still pushed inside his waistband, but he left the gun there, excusing the weapon with the thought that he might run across a coyote or something.

That afternoon he reached the stunted timber and rode sometimes along high ridges where the wind blew half a gale and the desert stretched away to a far, broken sky line like a scene painted garishly for some gigantic theater.

"Great setting for a story," he mused. "Soon as I run across old Hank and get him talking about old boom times, I'll maybe scare up a plot to fit."

He broke off the thought, turning in the saddle to scan the trail behind. He thought he had seen the brown horse perk his ears that way. The sorrel pack horse was concerned with his own affairs and gave no heed to anything but the difficulties of the trail; a morose, disillusioned beast, bereft of curiosity by the

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pessimistic conviction that whatever happened would be something worse again. But the brown horse walked alert to small adventures, half-pretended alarms. Woods was beginning to like the brown horse which he had not yet found a name to fit. If they were being followed, if it were not merely a fit of nervousness — and he hated to admit that possibility — the brown would give him warning.

The trail meandered on, dipping into barren land, mounting again to the piñons and cedar growth that crowned the higher ridges and plateaus. Deep valleys opened enticingly beneath him only to be lost straightway as the trail twisted around some rocky crest. Woods forgot that he had felt dogged and watched by something sinister. The beauty thrown carelessly in a jumbled heap before him made the rest of the world seem insignificant and tame. He rode blithely, tired as he was, just glad to be alive and in the saddle.

“Now I wonder if they didn’t name these mountains after they’d put all the kinks they had into the trail?” he pondered, when he had finished a bewildering switchback and won to the far side of a peak. “Straighten this trail out, and I’ll bet I have come a hundred miles. Empty, too, thank God. It’s my world while I’m in it, and it’s all good!”

He spent an hour watching the shifting splendors of a sunset and camped that night in a clump of pines, scarce remembering his fancies of the day.

Three days he traveled so, seeing never a soul. Sometimes faint trails branched off toward distant

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deep basins or wound down narrow canyons, but he kept to the one that led northwest in its general course, thinking to meet old Hank somewhere along the way perhaps; or at least to reach some camp where he could make inquiries and receive fairly intelligent answers. He still felt sometimes that he was being followed, and the brown horse seemed to share his belief at times. But nothing ever showed on the trail behind him and he set it down finally to the peculiar effect of the unaccustomed silence after the din and confusion of town. It was as if any mingling of sound had ceased to be. The sneezing of dust from the nostrils of the pack horse behind him was a startling interruption to the stillness of the world. It was as if all nature stood poised, listening, her finger on her lips.

But during that third night came the clamor of a whooping wind. Long before it struck the sheltered hollow where Woods had made his camp he was awakened by the roar of it. Propped on an elbow, listening, he thought he heard a train rushing over a high bridge somewhere in the middle distance. It took him a minute then to orient himself with his surroundings, to realize that he was three days' travel from the last human voice he had heard, that in this wild land trains and bridges were not.

"Oh, it's old Boreas making a night of it—or maybe his winged warriors having a spree with the maid o' the mountain. Let 'em alone. They aren't hurting anything."

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He lay down again, smiling to himself, and pulled a blanket over his head. Immediately he fell away into that deep, dreamless sleep which rewards one for making his bed under the stars.

But when he went for his horses, next morning, they were gone with the wind of the night. At first he thought they had wandered off in search of shelter, but later he discovered the print of a strange boot in the packed soil beside a huge boulder near the spot where he had left his saddle. The saddle was not there, and most of his outfit was gone. He took stock of the leavings and shrugged his shoulders at the meager outfit left to him.

He had his pipe and the can of tobacco which he had opened for the first time for his after-supper smoke. He had what coffee was left in the pot from supper, and a few scraps of cooked bannock and bacon. There was his bed — and because he had been using his little portable typewriter in a half-hearted attempt to start a story by describing a mountain peak painted rose and gold with sunset, the machine and his box of paper remained at the foot of his bed; just as his Luger was tucked under his pillow.

Woods counted his matches and decided that he could not afford to smoke between campfires. He took stock of his ammunition and knew that he must shoot his game for its size, and wait until he was sure of hitting; six cartridges do not encourage careless hunting.

He ate the scraps of food left to him, drank warmed-

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over coffee and rolled his few belongings in two blankets, making a light pack. There must be a camp within a few miles, he thought. The trail looked fairly well traveled, although he had met no one in three days. It must lead somewhere, and by following it he would arrive at some destination. He had no desire to return to Gold Center afoot — he remembered too vividly the interminable twists and steep switchbacks.

At the last minute he realized that he had been left without a canteen, that vital necessity of desert travel. Whoever had stolen the horses had evidently meant to do his killing in an indirect way, by thirst and exhaustion. Bill Woods set his lips grimly, picked up the coffeepot and added that to his load, and started out afoot.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE DESERT GIVES ACCORDING TO ITS KIND

By noon the wind was again a howling fury that whipped the stiff branches of the juniper trees and cedar and watered the eyes that faced it. Bill Woods eased his pack to a rock and canted an eye toward a bare ridge round which the trail crept warily. He was tired of the infernal zigzagging, and he made up his mind that hereafter he would cut straight across. He bent his shoulders to the pack again and began to climb.

The other side of the hill, when he attained to a point where he could look down, was steeper than he had expected, and much of the way was treacherous shale, but Bill was in a dogged mood that disdained to turn back. He slipped the pack off his shoulders and started down, sliding it alongside him. He had passed the first bad place and was digging heels into the second when a rock turned under the ball of one foot and threw him down. He arrived at the bottom of the ridge in a small avalanche of loose rocks and dust, with a badly twisted foot and a bruised shoulder. He sat for a while swearing in crude man fashion before he picked himself up, lifted the pack to his good shoulder and limped painfully down into a wooded basin where he broke a dead piñon branch for a staff before he went on, looking for the trail.

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He did not find it, but instead was compelled to negotiate another steep descent which gave him a miserable hour, crippled as he was. It occurred to him that the trail had reason for turning aside from this place, but he did not dwell much upon that just then, his mind given mostly to the agony in his ankle and the gnawing hunger in his stomach. He sat down and massaged his ankle, and broke his self-imposed rule for saving matches by smoking two pipes of tobacco before he attempted to hobble on.

When he discovered that his boot would not go back on the injured foot he haggled a square out of his heaviest blanket and wrapped up his foot as well as he could. He added the boot to his pack, got his bearings and went on to the west. In the next hour he had gained a short half-mile. The sun was dropping at an alarming rate, but he could not hurry — it was all he could do to walk at all.

Another half-mile and he cast about for a spot smooth of rocks and sat down, lying back against his blanket roll. He had reached the point where he must face his predicament squarely and figure out his chance of living through. In a story this would have been comparatively simple. He would read back and see what the general public would naturally expect to happen, and then plan something altogether different. Up here in the Grape Vines, off the trail as he was, without food or water and with a crippled foot and a bruised shoulder, he would need to do some figuring.

On paper he could easily pull off a miserable death

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or a rescue, as the plot, age and moral character of his man demanded. In reality, he was more or less at the mercy of fate — he did not take God into account in his life. He could not expect a rescue now and he refused to die. The only course left to him then was to keep going. Woods gritted his teeth and started on, with cold beads of moisture on his forehead and a dead-white line around his mouth under his beard. And God was good, for without having any definite plan save to keep fighting, Woods walked straight to a spring standing like an artificial pool just under a shelving ledge, with a whispery trickle of water stealing away down a gulch. His lips trembled with exhaustion as he let himself down awkwardly and drank his fill of the cold water.

Afterwards he bared his swollen foot, put it under the trickle and pulled his pack apart, covering himself with one blanket and using the other for a pillow. A man of faith would have called that spring a definite answer to prayer, but Woods had no faith and no prayers were ever in his heart or on his lips. He called it luck and dropped into uneasy dreaming, to be called back in the dark by the beat, beat, beat of anguish in the wrenched annular ligaments. Wide awake, he lay with his teeth set and endured the torture until morning and beyond into the day.

He could not go on. He did not own that he was afraid to leave the spring. His head ached, hunger gnawed ceaselessly at his vitals, his ankle was a concentrated anguish in spite of the cold-water treatment.

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All that day he lay inert beside the spring and frightened away the wild things coming to drink, and wondered dully if the desert really meant to bleach his damned bones for him. Once or twice — twice to be exact — he held the Luger in his right hand and debated cynically upon the worthlessness of life as he had found it in the past and was finding it in the present. He finally decided that he would be a fool to shoot himself over a sprained ankle and a few missing meals. His dramatic sense revolted against such cowardice, except in the villain of the piece. He was his own hero — he couldn't go out that way. Then he dozed again and dreamed he was reading before a large audience how

“The lean kioty yaps at the dawn,
And the stars grow pale as the day comes on ——”

And the audience laughed and shouted in a chorus, “Yess-a! We *got* no-o bananas!” to prove that they caught his meaning.

On the second day he awoke out of a heavy sleep and knew that he was going on if he had to crawl. His shoulder was better, anyway. The ankle was no worse, and he judged, from the fact that he had slept for hours, that it must be better; that, or he was growing accustomed to the pain.

He rolled his portable typewriter and his paper and other writing supplies in his two blankets, stood up on his good leg and wedged the bundle into a crevice in the rocks. Then he drank, filled his coffeepot with

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water and plugged the spout, took up his piñon stick and hobbled slowly away from the spring, going down the gulch. He was so weak from hunger and the fever of his hurt that he staggered a little now and then, which sometimes threw his full weight on his ankle. Such times he went down in a heap of agony and barely saved the coffeepot from spilling all the water. After a time he would get up and go on.

He walked where the footing was easiest, avoiding small rocks and uneven ridges as he would rattle-snakes. So he did not observe much of his surroundings until he came face to face with a pole fence built up into a jutting ledge and barring his way. He looked up then and saw that he had come out of the gulch beside a corral. Just beyond the fence an old man was milking a cow, his head bowed so that the crown of his hat was crushed against the cow's flank. A girl in bib overalls and curly, bobbed hair was putting stripes on the cow's horns with colored crayons and giggling over the job. "Barby 'll think they grow this way," she was saying gleefully, when she glanced up and saw Woods standing close to the fence and staring at her; a gaunt, wild-eyed figure in wrinkled, earth-stained khaki, with a blackened coffeepot in one hand and a crooked stick in the other.

The girl stifled a scream, started to run and then stood her ground. The old man lifted his head slowly, looked around and got up hurriedly, the milking stool in one hand and the bucket in the other. For several heartbeats they all stood motionless, staring.

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Woods, having greater need than the others, took the initiative. He gravely turned the pot upside down and thrust it through the fence.

"I'd be obliged to you for some of that milk, Hank Hawkins," he said with harsh insistence.

"Why — why, hello, Bill!" Hank gave a weak, embarrassed cackle.

"May I have some milk?" Woods pushed the coffeepot an inch farther through the fence, his eyes going wolfishly from Hank to the bucket. He gave the girl no attention whatever.

"Why — why, 'tain't mine to give," Hank stut-tered, dismayed astonishment still paralyzing his faculties. "You know, Bill, I ——"

"Don't be so dumb!" the girl commanded him sharply. "Can't you see he's starving? Give him all the milk he wants."

Hank complied, his eyes clinging so to Bill's face that he wasted milk, pouring as much outside as went into the coffeepot. Bill drank to the last drop, lowered the pot from his lips and stared hard at Hank.

"Y-you ain't *afoot*?" Hank's voice shrilled with exaggerated concern, almost comical in its patent insincerity.

"Oh, no. I drove a four-horse team over from Gold Center!" Certainty of relief steadied Woods amazingly.

"Well, I'll be dogged!" Hank cackled unconvincingly, darting sidelong glances this way and that like a cat in a corner and wanting to escape.

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"You go over to the house and tell the cook I said she was to feed you," the girl commanded Woods with youthful assurance. "Milk isn't much of a breakfast, if you're real hungry. Go right around the corner of the corral and on around that point of rocks. You can see the roof of the house in among the trees. Don't talk loud — dad and Barby aren't up yet."

"Thank you." Woods turned, giving Hank a last searching look, and began hobbling painfully along the fence.

"What is he — a hobo?" He heard the girl quite plainly before he turned the corner. "You called him Bill, and he called you Hank, but he looks like a hobo. Is he?"

"W-well, I never heard him ast for a hand-out, b'fore." Hank's tone was disparaging. "Bill drifted into the country and stayed a while at my camp, a coupla years ago. Seemed like he had money, then — but he never earned it and I'll bet on that. Hands didn't look like a workin' man. Called himself Bill Woods, but he didn't always answer to it like he owned it. Funny feller. Set by the hour on some high peak and jest *look*. Never could git him to talk about hisself, but he was willin' enough to ast questions. Don't you go makin' up to 'im, Joe!"

"Maybe he's a stage robber!" Bill did not look, but he was sure that the girl clapped her hands together. "He's that ugly, Bill Hart type of outlaw and he's probably been hurt escaping and was hiding up in the hills till hunger drove him out of cover. Did

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you get that sardonic smile on his embittered lips when he said he drove a four-horse team ——”

“That was milk on his whiskers,” Hank corrected glumly. “I never seen him do much smilin’.”

“Dumb-bell!”

Woods did not hear Hank’s reply to that, but presently the girl overtook him.

“If you’d like to lie low till your lameness is gone, I can fix it with mother,” she began in her abrupt way. “You don’t have to explain — mother’s perfectly gorgeous about understanding. Maybe you’d better stop at the bunk house. It’s closer. I’ll have Mary bring your breakfast down from the house. You look pretty well faded, but you needn’t explain. This family minds its own affairs. This is the bunk house. You go on in and wait.”

Woods nodded, muttered his thanks and hobbled into the rock cabin. Two iron beds stood opposite each other in one end of the room, one with tumbled blankets and the other smoothly spread. He limped to the smooth one, sat down and with both hands lifted his injured foot to the bed. He lay back on the pillow with a long sigh of relief. All at once he went slack in mind and body, as his nervous tension, his sense of responsibility for his own welfare, relaxed with the consciousness that here were shelter, food, friendly protection. Even the pain in his ankle dulled to a sullen throbbing as if he had swallowed an opiate. A droning, humming sound filled his head and sent his thoughts scurrying here and there and away into

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vague visions that presently faded to blank unconsciousness.

A tall, square-jawed, shapeless woman entered the door, a full tray clutched in her widespread hands. She stopped, stared for a space and awkwardly backed out, bumping into the girl and her mother who had followed close.

"*He* ain't worrying about grub!" she snorted resentfully. "He's dead to the world a'ready. Drunk, if you want to know what *I* think."

CHAPTER FIVE

WOODS FINDS A SURPRISE OR TWO

WOODS opened his eyes and blinked rapidly, pulling his mind into gear. The distorted face and figure of Hank Hawkins sitting on the opposite bed steadied and drew down to a normal focus. Hank's apostolic appearance was somewhat marred by a look of discomfiture, and he was combing his long white beard with dirty fingers in a way that promised trouble. But his words were peaceable enough.

"Woke up, ay? This is a suprise, Bill. Dogged if it ain't a suprise!"

"Surprise that I'm awake?" Woods was beginning to remember some things which had been pushed into the background by his accident and its attendant miseries. His eyes veiled his thoughts and his face smoothed to the impassive look of the gambler.

"Suprise to see yuh."

"How's that? I thought I was expected to meet you, Hank." He shifted his shoulders so that he lay on his side, and got out his pipe. "I thought you were to meet me in Gold Center."

"Well, now — about that Gold Center deal — say! Didn't you git my letter, Bill?"

"What letter was that?" Bill flicked Hank's face with a glance that said nothing but saw much.

Hank twisted his whiskers into a loose rope, thrust

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them in between two buttons on his gingham shirt and pulled them out again immediately.

"Why, I wrote and told yuh, Bill, yuh better not come over to the claims. I got to thinkin' it over — and I hated to see you put any more money into them claims right now ——"

"Yes?"

"Silver's away down and likely to stay down, Bill, and it seems like a waste of good time and money t' go puttin' anything more — didn't you *git* my letter?"

"No," said Bill, when he had got his pipe going. "The last letter I got was when you wanted three hundred dollars for grub and powder. You wanted it sent to Gold Center by the first of May. You said you'd be there waiting for it and for God's sake don't fail to have the money there for you on time."

Hank squirmed and spread his whiskers into a fan which he closed at once.

"I got to thinkin' — and I sure wrote to yuh about my change of plans, Bill. I'm dogged if I see why you never ——"

"Did you write after you got my letter saying that I'd bring the money and go with you to the claims?"

"*Now* what you drivin' at, Bill?" Hank eyed him, looked away, darted another quick glance at Woods. "I'll be dogged if I see what — sure, I wrote! Why 'n hell wouldn't I write and say what I damn pleased? Ain't that what the mails is for? I sure did write, Bill. I didn't want to see yuh sink no more money where you wouldn't git nothing out, did I?"

Woods Finds a Surprise or Two

"I thought the money was for assessment work," said Bill mildly. "I thought it was important to get it done before the first of July."

"Aw, hell! Why, I wrote and told yuh that wasn't necessary — dogged if I like the way you keep throwin' things at me when I wrote and explained all about why I was changin' my mind! Hell, ain't I got my labor up agin your money? Ain't I done all the hard, dirty work whilst you set back and kep' your finger nails clean ——"

"And earned the money to buy the grub," Woods reminded him gently.

"Now I'll be dogged if I like that! Ain't my time and labor worth nothin', Bill? D' you think for a minute I don't want to git the most and the best outa my time and labor?" His prominent eyes of a washed blue color and a staring expression turned upon Bill with reproach.

"I expect you do, Hank."

"Yes, and I don't want to throw none away, just like I wouldn't want to see you throw good dollars away. I wrote and told yuh we better not do nothing with them claims right at present and there wasn't no need of you comin' over. Then I hunted for some honest work that 'd pay me a livin', and I got into a deal here that I can't drop right now. So I don't see but what you ——"

"What kind of a deal, Hank? Mining?"

"Well, now, I ain't at liberty to say just — m-m — yes, minin'. Sure, it's minin'! What else would it be

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if it ain't minin'?" Hank combed furiously at his whiskers and glared at Bill.

"Does it include milking cows?"

"M-m — well, yuh see, Bill, Mis' Marshall, she's agin mines. This deal I got is with Marshall. He wants a mine. Out here for his health, and he wants somethin' he kin take an int'rurst in. Wants to pick up a little money of his own. She's agin it — and you know how it is, Bill, when the woman wears the pants. Bosses him from mornin' to night. So I kinda chore around like — she don't know I'm a miner. Him and me, we got our own arrangement on the side. You'll be goin' back right away. But whilst you're here, Bill — say to-day and mebbby to-morrow, seein' you're kinda bunged up — I'll take it as a favor if you don't go lettin' out that we been foolin' with minin' claims. You know how it is, Bill. Give a woman an inch — Best not let on we're acquainted, Bill. She might git to pumpin' yuh about me —"

"I see." Woods didn't, but he was going to before he was through with Hank, he promised himself.

"Yeah. Well, you kin let on like you come out on some project of your own, Bill, and you're goin' right back."

"I did," said Bill drily. "But I don't know when I'll go back."

"Yuh did?" Hank stared. "I'll be dogged if I see why yuh kep' on pumpin' me about them old claims of ourn, then. What's *your* project, Bill?"

Bill grinned and shook his head.

Woods Finds a Surprise or Two

"That's just about as secret as yours is, Hank."

Hank got up and started for the door, hesitated, pulling at his beard. He came back and leaned over Bill and shook a finger under Bill's nose.

"I told yuh not to come. I wrote and said I couldn't do nothin' with the claims this spring. There ain't nothin' to keep yuh over here in the desert, Bill. There ain't a thing to keep yuh — not if you're a friend uh mine. Secret business here, ay? I'll be dogged if I like the idea of havin' you snoopin' and taggin' me around after I've wrote and told yuh to stay where you're at! What you better do is git. I don't like it, the way you come trailin' me up. Looks mighty fishy to me!"

"By the way, Hank, I thought our claims carried gold. That isn't down, is it?"

"Doubtin' my word right off the bat, ay? I said silver. Mebby there mighta been a showin' of gold in the start, but it's silver now — and not too damn much of that. Hell, what's the use of talkin' to a greenhorn?" He turned again and went out of the cabin, combing his whiskers and muttering to himself.

Bill pulled an extra pillow under his head and lay back, sucking at his pipe and reflecting upon this sudden change of heart and mind in old Hank Hawkins.

This appeared to be Bill's reception hour. Not ten minutes elapsed before a tall, thin man stepped in at the door and stood looking at Bill appraisingly for a minute before he advanced to the foot of the bed. Bill sat up, which was as much as he felt that the occasion

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demanded of a cripple, and returned the man's measuring look.

"Oh, hello. I heard some one had wandered in off the desert, pretty lame and hungry. You desert rats do take awful chances, roaming around on foot the way you do. Just traveling through, Hank tells me."

"Not in any great rush, at that."

"No, I suppose you want to lay up here for a day or so. What's your name, my man?"

"Hank probably told you. Bill Woods."

"H'm-m — yes, I believe he called you Bill. Now, I believe in coming out open and aboveboard, Bill. Hank doesn't seem to know what your business is. That might mean one thing, and it might mean another. You're not—not a bootlegger, by any chance?"

"No." Woods frowned slightly, but that was because of a twinge in his ankle. "I wouldn't corrupt the morals of the lizards and jackrabbits that way. If I wanted to peddle hooch I'd hunt a trade in the cities."

"H'm-m — yes, that sounds reasonable. Whisky's a curse to mankind. We find men enslaved to it, even here in the desert. And one can't be too careful, living out away from every one, like this. If I thought you were in the business ——" He broke off, eyeing Woods sharply.

"I give you my word I'm not." Woods grinned suddenly. "I walked in here and drank about a quart of milk. Nothing alarming about that, is there?"

Woods Finds a Surprise or Two

"N-no — I dare say you are telling the truth. Where are you from?"

"New York, Denver and points west. I wintered in California."

"The hobo's paradise. And how did you get away off here, so far from the railroad?"

"I was hunting old Hank. I rode most of the way over from Gold Center, and walked the rest of the way." Woods could see no particular reason for lying to his host, even though he was not disposed to give a full account of his experience. He had a vague plan of his own and he wanted some time to think it over.

"Hunting — Hank?" Marshall put out a thin hand and grasped the foot rail of the bed, gripping it until his knuckles whitened. "You came here — after Hank?"

"Not that, exactly. I lost my horses and the trail, and sprained my ankle, all in the same day. I stumbled in here by accident. I didn't know Hank was here."

"What do you want him for?"

"Oh, — nothing, I guess. I didn't expect to find him here working for you. If you can see your way clear to letting me stay till I can travel ——"

"Of course you'll stay!" A rich, contralto voice spoke unexpectedly from the doorway, and both men gave a start of surprise.

"Oh, ah-h — that you, Henrietta? The man has sprained his ankle, he says." Marshall's manner was

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confused, oddly perturbed, as if his wife's coming had somehow upset him.

"Yes, Joe said he limped as if he had a bad sprain. I've brought iodine and bandages." She turned her head and called, "Joe! You may tell Mary to bring the man's lunch in about ten minutes." She looked again at Bill with kindly solicitude. She would probably look that way at a lame dog, Bill thought.

"Have you been doing anything for it?" she asked, when Bill had removed the clumsy wrapping of blanket from his ankle.

"Cold water is all I could do. But I had to walk on it afterwards."

"I don't see how you ever managed to walk. Charles, will you hold his foot up off the blankets while I paint it with iodine? Let's see — what is your name?"

"Bill."

"Well, Bill, you won't do much walking for a while, I can promise you. I'll send down a pair of crutches so you can move about a little, but you must keep that foot off the floor. You're quite welcome to stay as long as it's necessary, and you won't be bothered by any one."

Bill's eyelids flickered at the slight emphasis she placed on the last word. Evidently Joe had passed along her conviction that he was an outlaw of the Bill Hart type and was hiding out.

"That's mighty good of you, Mrs. ——"

"I'm Mrs. Marshall, and this is Mr. Marshall."

Woods Finds a Surprise or Two

Come in, Joe. This is my baby girl, Josephine. Say how do you do to Bill, my dear."

"How do you do, Bill," Josephine repeated obediently. And she added demurely, "Chow's coming up."

Mrs. Marshall, a tall, finely proportioned woman with an abundance of white hair waving softly back from her face, was deftly bandaging Bill's ankle. She straightened and stood studying his face with calm brown eyes.

"People very seldom come to the ranch, so you will have to amuse yourself as best you can while you are laid up. Do you like to read?"

"Sometimes, yes, ma'am." Bill's lips twitched. He was beginning to enjoy himself.

"I'll send down some magazines. And you'll have Hank for company."

"Hank is going up to the claims, Henrietta," Marshall informed his wife deprecatingly. "We're anxious to get that vein opened up. It looks like good silver, he thinks."

Again Bill's eyelids flickered, but he did not look up.

"Well, he'll probably be down again before Bill is able to walk. Here's your lunch, Bill. You were asleep and missed your breakfast, you know."

"It's just as well," said Bill drily. "They say it's bad luck to load up with grub after you've gone without for a few days. That milk was a pleasant surprise to my stomach and kept it happy for a while."

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Mrs. Marshall looked at him curiously, took the tray from Mary's hands and signalled her husband to pull a box up beside the bed.

"You haven't always been a — a human derelict, have you, Bill?" she challenged him somewhat bluntly.

"N-no, ma'am, I was brought up a Baptist," Bill admitted, his eyes on the ham and eggs.

"I've seen you somewhere before, but I can't think where," she continued, ignoring his reply though Josephine giggled frankly. "You remind me of some one ——"

"Was you ever around the free wards of the city hospitals, ma'am?" Bill had almost betrayed how startled he was, but he went on doggedly. "In New York, I mean. When I was run over by a — a truck, a lady somethin' like you come through the ward."

Mrs. Marshall looked at him suspiciously, shook her head and walked out, gently shooing her daughter before her. Marshall had edged out of the room as soon as possible; to find Hank, Woods suspected. Bill stared glumly after the woman and sugared his coffee twice.

"Looks like a club woman, or a charity worker or something," he mused, and felt a distinct panicky fear of recognition. Then he pulled himself together and attacked the ham with keen relish. Sufficient unto another visit would be the embarrassment thereof. Maybe he could borrow a razor and get rid of those trademark whiskers before she came again, he thought, and felt better.

Woods Finds a Surprise or Two

Outside in the path the girl was taking ecstatic little dance steps beside her mother.

"I *know* he's an outlaw. Wasn't it just priceless, the way he looked when you thought you'd seen him somewhere? You knocked him for a goal that time, old dear. I could have shrieked!"

"Don't be slangy, Joe. I wish I could remember whom he reminds me of. He hasn't the look of a criminal — and yet there's a furtive look in his eyes that I don't like. Don't go to the bunk house alone, Joe."

"Don't worry. Bill's too old for me to get all fussed over."

"He isn't particularly romantic," her mother admitted placidly. "I could see that your father distrusts him, Joe. It might be best not to let him have crutches. — That ankle will hold him down for a few days, though. There's nothing faked about that!"

CHAPTER SIX

SMALL MYSTERIES ARE LIKE MOSQUITOES

THE shrieking of a woman woke Woods that night, and he automatically swung his feet out of bed before he remembered that he was in no condition to race to anybody's rescue. The fierce reminder from his outraged ankle came at the exact moment when he heard the loud report of a revolver shot, and his ankle got the first notice. By the time he had stopped gritting swear words he heard the voice of Marshall expostulating, and a woman trying to explain and cry at the same time. The result was a clamor of incoherence, in the midst of which he caught the sound of some one running past the bunk house.

By the time Woods had got into his clothes, found the crutches and hobbled to the door the voices by the house had quieted to a confused murmur. He stood listening for a minute, then swung his crutches over the doorsill and went awkwardly along the path, acutely conscious of his uselessness but wanting nevertheless to know what had happened.

Five vague figures turned nervously to stare at him in the starlight as he came hopping up to them.

"Here comes Wild Bill to the rescue," he overheard Joe announcing in her youthful voice that carried far.

"It wasn't him," said the voice that had explained tearfully. "He was humped over purty near double

Small Mysteries

when he bumped into me in the cellar door. Then I hollered and took a shot at him."

"A bear," said Marshall in the tone of one who had been hammering away at a stubborn mind. "They always rise up on their hind feet when they are startled, and would look, in the dark, like a man with his shoulders hunched down."

"I never felt no fur," Mary insisted doggedly. "I woke up an' remembered I never set my sponge, so I got up an' went to the cellar for my yeast, and I seen the door was open an' somethin' was movin' inside, so I goes back an' gits the gun an' comes back, an' jest as I started in the door he come pilin' out an' knocked me over an' run. An' I up an' took a shot at him ——"

"Isn't that record about worn out? It's beginning to sound scratched, to me," a voice interrupted; a voice that made Woods start and turn toward her.

"It was a bear, I'm sure of it," said Marshall.

"If it 'd been a bear I 'd 'a' felt the fur. And I 'd 'a' smelt 'im," Mary argued belligerently. "It wa'n't no bear; it was a man."

"It couldn't be a man. Bill, here, is crippled and couldn't run, and no stranger would come away off here afoot after food. There are bears in these mountains, and they are very cunning and very bold at times. The cellar contains honey, doesn't it? A bear will travel for miles after honey. And," Mr. Marshall added positively, "once inside he would take anything he could get his hands on. I mean, of course, his front paws. They use them like hands, just as monkeys do.

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I'll have Hank set a trap in the hills, and in the meantime you girls must stay close to the ranch."

"I think it's a brutal hour to get up and have a lesson in natural history. Aunt Henrietta, I'm going to bed, if you'll disarm Mary. That bullet whistled past my window. I heard it."

The owner of the disturbing voice turned and left the group to its futile discussion.

Woods stared after her. She was little and slim. — He had an impulse to call after her and say, "Oh, here's your ring!" But the place was somewhat public for that, and he would need to explain a good deal. Besides, on second thought, he was not absolutely certain of that voice. This girl had sounded like the girl of the ring, but he would not swear that the voice was the same.

"You'd better all go back to bed," said Mrs. Marshall in her calmly decisive way. "Man or animal, we won't be bothered to-night, and in the morning we can look for tracks. Bill, since you are able to get around, we shall expect you to eat here at the house. Your breakfast will be ready in the kitchen at eight o'clock."

"Yes, ma'am," said Bill meekly and hopped slowly back to his bed. Let that haughty woman know that she had fed Woods Morgan in her kitchen and given him shelter in her bunk house? Woods knew too well how the incident would grow and spread and how his own little circle of friends would relish the yarn. Moreover, there was the matter of getting his story

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material out of Hank, if possible, and finding out where his stolen horses were to be found. There were no life-and-death issues at stake, but Woods felt that he had reason enough for wearing the mask a while longer. Whenever he pleased he could disappear, and the little comedy would be ended with malice toward none.

He lay awake for a long time, thinking mostly about the girl who had protested against getting up at midnight to hear a lesson in natural history. She must be the Barby who was not an early riser and who was expected to think a cow grew horns striped with red and green and yellow. If she were the girl with the ring and had left the city soon after she broke her engagement, that would account for his never receiving an answer to his ads. With an Aunt Henrietta over in Nevada it was not at all unlikely that she had slipped away from the neighborhood of the man who had wanted her to be a sweet-Alice type of girl.

Mary's encounter in the door of the outside cellar did not mystify him much. Some man had been foraging for supplies and had been surprised in the act. Those running footsteps told a plain enough story, and the theory of the bear was, he strongly suspected, concocted for the comfort of the women. "Though most women are more scared of a bear than they would be of a man," he reflected sleepily. "They took me calmly enough, I notice."

He overslept and it was the vigorous ringing of a hand bell that woke him. He had meant to paint his

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ankle again before he dressed, but he decided to wait and do that after breakfast. Barby might not be up yet, but he wanted the story of last night again while it was fresh and under discussion. He was hobbling out to the path that led around the corner of the bunk house to the rock house when he met Mr. Marshall coming down the path, evidently looking for tracks. Bill stopped and lifted himself to one side of the trail.

"Good morning," he greeted respectfully. "You won't find any bear's tracks, Mr. Marshall. I heard a man run past here right after the shot, last night."

Marshall halted abruptly and stood peering at Bill with his watery blue eyes that shifted away from a straight eye-to-eye look, Bill noticed, as if his mind darted to other subjects without warning.

"Oh, you did? Might have been an animal — anyway, I don't want my wife worried about this little affair, Bill. I don't want her to get the idea that strangers are prowling around the place nights. It — she's very nervous about such things, though she tries to hide the fact."

"Isn't she afraid of bears?"

"Possibly — but a sneak thief of a man coming at night — I don't want her to know anything about it, Bill. Don't mention the subject to any one. I've got them quieted down pretty well and I don't want them all stirred up again. That fool of a Mary is dangerous. I didn't know she had a gun in her possession, but I've taken it away from her now. Shooting wild like

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that — it's the greatest wonder in the world she didn't hit somebody."

"Maybe she did," Bill suggested drily. "That splash there on that stone looks to me like blood."

Marshall looked, stooped quickly and picked up the stone.

"Dripped off a chicken Hank killed and took to the house yesterday," he said, and threw the stone up into the rubble on the hillside. "I hope you are not given to making mountains out of molehills, my man. Go on to the house and get your breakfast — and remember, I don't want any tongue-wagging to the women!"

Woods' eyes flicked wide open, stared hardly and then his eyelids drooped with that veiling effect which hid whatever was in his thoughts. He swung one crutch forward and stopped, turning his head toward his host.

"I'd like to borrry a razor, if I can," he said with a slovenly enunciation that would have shocked his acquaintances.

"A razor? Don't you always wear whiskers?"

"No, sir. Not after t'day, I don't. Not if I kin git the loan of a razor."

"Ah-h — well, my wife will fix you up. Or tell Mary to get that old shaving outfit of mine in the cupboard of the bathroom. She'll know which one I mean. Tell her the razor with the broken handle."

"Thanks," drawled Woods, and hobbled on to the house, thinking how easy it would be to change Mar-

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shall's objectionable manner to one of eager hospitality toward a distinguished guest.

For that very reason he slouched down into his chair at the kitchen table and didn't take off his hat until Mary yelled at him to remember where he was and did he think he was in the stable. He ate in silence, after that, except when he asked her for the razor with the broken handle and the outfit that went with it. She looked as if she suspected him of wanting to cut their throats but his description was minute and his authority the command of the head of the house, so she brought razor, strop and mug and plumped them down beside him. He nodded his thanks and went off to make himself slightly more presentable and less easily recognized. He was rather glad, on the whole, that none of the women appeared in the kitchen. They were at breakfast, he knew. Mary's hurried trips into the next room and the click of dishes beyond the door told him that much.

In the bunk house he faced a small mystery. The four-ounce bottle of iodine and the gauze roll left by Mrs. Marshall for his use were gone from the box at the head of the bed. While he clipped and lathered and shaved he studied last night's affair more carefully and decided that Hank was at the bottom of it all. Certainly he must have taken the antiseptic, unless Marshall himself had carried it off — and it was unlikely to the point of idiocy that Marshall was an accomplice in robbing his own cellar. Hank, of course, would need supplies while he was away at the

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mining, which was emphatically not a secret, but he wouldn't have to steal them and run the risk of being shot.

There was more to it than that. The man who had run down past the bunk house had evidently needed iodine and bandages, and the stuff had been taken while Woods was at breakfast. It did look as if Marshall had got them, but why should any man known to him go into the cellar at night and run when he met Mary in the door? Why hadn't he told her who he was and what he was after? And if some one familiar with the ranch had accidentally run foul of the cook, why had he waited until breakfast time before coming for the iodine? Or why hadn't Marshall explained to him that Mary had made a mistake?

"Of course, I'm just a crippled hobo that's barely eligible to the kitchen table," Woods answered the last point. "If I could run they'd be accusing me of raiding the cellar. There's an Ethiopian somewhere in the fuel supply on this ranch, and I'd like to take a crack at him, for luck."

At noon Mrs. Marshall came into the kitchen with half a dozen magazines, to one of which Woods Morgan was a regular contributor. She was coolly gracious — patronizing — Woods called it to himself — and took refuge in crudity that would have shamed many a Russian peasant.

"And how is your ankle, Bill? Did you paint it again with iodine?"

"No'm, not yet I ain't."

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"Well, you should. Iodine takes the soreness and inflammation from the muscles."

Bill looked at his plate and did not answer, and Mrs. Marshall went back into the dining room. If she had observed the change in his appearance she made no comment, and he hobbled away from the house with the magazines under his arm, wishing vaguely that he could get at his typewriter. Now that he was laid up he might be able to turn out some work, at night when the family would not hear the machine, maybe. Or with a pencil he could rough-draft a story or two and copy the stuff later. There is nothing like enforced inaction to stir a desire for work.

The iodine bottle stood again on the box beside his bed. Fully half the contents had disappeared, and the bandage roll was still missing. Bill sat down on the side of his bed and stared hard at the bottle, which told him nothing whatever. It occurred to him that there was no time like the present, so he painted his ankle afresh before the bottle could vanish again. A considerable quantity had been used, or else a portion of the iodine had been poured into another bottle for future use — which Woods accepted finally as an explanation of the amount missing. The bottle had been full and it was now less than half full.

He rebandaged the ankle carefully and lay back to smoke and read. But the magazines were old ones which he had read when they were fresh, and the contents were not such as to bear a second reading with any result but complete boredom, so he took his

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crutches and hopped outside and began a slow, desultory tour of the trodden paths about the place. It had struck him as an unusual circumstance, this finding of a family of some apparent culture on a desert ranch so far from any town, and he was curious to see what sort of a place they had. Hank had said that Marshall was here for his health, which might or might not be true. And in any case it was strange that no ranch work seemed to be going on. Or there might be men who did the work and boarded themselves elsewhere, for he was fairly sure that Marshall himself did no work of any consequence.

He made his way slowly to the stable and corral, thinking that he could gain a fair estimate of the ranch from the extent and character of the farm equipment scattered about. There was a garage with a car inside, and a drum or two of gasoline and oil. There was a stack butt of alfalfa hay, and in the stable were three stalls for horses. Harness, a couple of saddles, odds and ends that will accumulate on any ranch in the course of time were scattered about with little regard for the well-being of the articles or the appearance of the place, but he saw no farm implements save a wagon.

Bill turned away and started for the cowshed built against the bluff just beyond the stable. He went slowly, not much interested, but killing time with small details — as when he halted to observe a peculiar shadow that projected beyond the northwest corner of the shed; a shadow that bore a strong resemblance to

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the head of a man. As he stood looking at it with idle interest the shadow moved, the outline sharpened and added certain curious details. An arm lifted, crooked above the tilted head in a revealing pantomime that made Bill Woods grin in sudden amusement.

The shadow disappeared, bunched again into view, was drawn quickly to the corner of the shed and so out of sight. Bill waited for a minute longer and then returned the way he had come, in no mind to be accused of spying. Of one thing he was sure: The man who had made the shadow was not Hank Hawkins, because there was no beard to hide the outline of the chin; unless, indeed, Hank had tucked his whiskers inside his shirt, as sometimes he did.

The short journey had wearied him, the effort of lifting himself along with the crutches had become burdensome. He stopped in the shade of the stable to rest and was sitting there on a box when Marshall came along, humming a little tune under his breath and swinging a stick as if it were a baton and he were leading a parade. Woods chuckled at the sight of him, and Marshall stopped short, his head drooping forward on his long neck, his watery eyes fixed questioningly on Bill's face. But just as Bill would have sworn he was going to speak, Marshall changed his mind and went on, swinging his stick as before and lifting his knees like a boy going forth to slay giants.

Woods looked after him, shook his head and laughed to himself.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WOODS VOLUNTEERS HIS SERVICES

"BILL, are you busy?"

Bill sat up and laid aside his magazine. He had been reading the advertisements half-heartedly with his eyes while his mind went shuttling from one thing to another, as bored minds will do. Mainly he had been thinking of the nagging little mysteries that had come to his notice in the past twenty-four hours.

"No, ma'am, come right on in."

Mrs. Marshall came in, her fine face pale and her eyes anxious. She walked to the one chair, pulled it up near the foot of the bed opposite Bill and sat down. For the first time since yesterday she studied Bill's smooth-shaven face with attention, but her words concerned another matter.

"Bill, did you bring any whisky onto the place with you?"

"No, ma'am, I didn't." Bill gave her a quick look that betrayed his astonishment at her question.

Mrs. Marshall bit her lips, looked at him searchingly and turned her eyes away.

"Of course, that's a strange question for me to ask, but I have the name of being a blunt woman. You came here hurt and hungry and we took you in and have done the best we could for you. We haven't asked you who or what you are, Bill. We took you

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on trust. Wouldn't you think that trust deserved a little gratitude?"

"I'll say it deserves a lot of gratitude. And I'd say you're getting a lot — if you want to know." Bill looked at her again keenly before he drooped his lids.

"Well, I don't ask much, Bill. I don't want to know who you are or what you're doing in the country. All under heaven I ask of you, Bill, is to tell me the truth about this. *Did* you bring any whisky here, or near here?"

"No, ma'am, I did not."

She stared at him, her eyes wide and searching his soul. She opened her lips twice without speaking, then flushed and took what to her must have been a desperate plunge.

"Bill — do you know where Mr. Marshall got whisky to-day?"

"No, ma'am, I don't. I can tell you about where it's cached, though, if you want to know."

"You can? If you don't know how ——"

"It's like this, Mrs. Marshall. I didn't want to read and I got out and walked down to the stable. I was just looking around for want of something better to do. I looked in the stable and then I went down to the cowshed. And because I didn't feel like hoisting myself over the bars I walked along the other side, opposite the corral. Just beyond the corner was the shadow of a man, and as I looked he lifted up a bottle and took a big drink. I'm guessing at the size of the

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drink by the time he stood with the bottle tilted up before his face. I turned and went back. I didn't want to get caught snooping into some other fellow's affairs so I got out of the way. I was resting my crutches in the shade of the stable when Mr. Marshall came along. He was feeling good."

"He's drunk," she stated bluntly. "I'm too desperate to mince words over him to-day. Bill, if I thought you could be trusted ——"

"I can be, with whisky," Bill stated frankly. "I never did fall for that sort of thing. A glass of wine, maybe, or cham ——" He checked himself, biting the incriminating word off short.

"Yes? A glass of wine or champagne, you say. I can be trusted too, Bill. You may safely tell me who you really are and what — no, never mind what your trouble is, and perhaps you'd better not say anything about yourself. That isn't what I came to talk about. You're a man of some education, so please don't mutilate your words hereafter unless you make a better job of it than you have done so far. One thing — are you dodging arrest for anything?"

"Not a thing. I believe I'm harmless, Mrs. Marshall. I was on a trip for my own pleasure, mostly, and got set afoot and crippled, and wandered in here. That's the truth, I assure you."

She sighed like one who is wearied to the point of absolute discouragement and stared vacant-eyed at the wall.

"Well, it doesn't matter. What I want is some man

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I can trust to keep sober. Bill, we are living here in the desert as a last resort, to cure my husband of drinking. Nothing else did him any good. We've tried everything, and this is my last fight. It's *got* to succeed, Bill. I thought, away out here, he couldn't get hold of anything, and the fine air and simple life would gradually do the work. He was willing to come — he promises everything I ask — and for a time it did work. Charles took an interest in making things grow, and we spent a good deal of money in getting this ranch started. It's our third year here, and I was beginning to feel as if I'd won the fight. And then a man who was working for us on the ranch brought in a jug of moonshine he'd got hold of somewhere ——

"I started him traveling," she gritted, "at the point of a gun! Charles was half-blind from the effects of the stuff. I pulled him through, but since then I seem to have lost my grip on the situation, somehow. Charles promised to leave it alone, to tell me the moment any whisky came to the ranch, but —— I don't know. For a long time I've felt vaguely that he was getting a little pretty regularly. I found out from Mary that he helps himself quite often to coffee berries, and he never did that before. I've heard that they chew coffee ——"

"They do. It makes a rotten breath but it kills the whisky smell," said Bill.

Mrs. Marshall nodded.

"Yes, it fooled me for a long while, even when

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my instinct told me something was wrong. I've let out the ranch to a man who lives by himself up the valley." She waved a well-shaped hand toward the east. "I couldn't keep any hands here. I was afraid another demijohn might find its way in here. The man — his name is Nelson — who rents the farm land is straight, I'm sure."

"How about old Hank? I never saw him drinking, but ——"

"I've watched Hank pretty closely. He got Charles to grubstake him in a mining venture, and he's back and forth, but I think Charles was getting stuff before then; at least, he was showing certain symptoms and chewing coffee. I was glad to see him take an interest in the mining claims, because he had been growing terribly moody and discontented, and this seems to take his mind off things. I think he has been brighter and more normal since he went into mining with Hank. They expect to make their everlasting fortune with those claims." She smiled faintly.

"How about last night? I didn't tell you, Mrs. Marshall, but I heard a man run past here, after Mary shot. I was getting into my clothes at the time. I thought Mr. Marshall was very anxious for the bear story to get over — didn't you?"

"A bear," said she, with a certain grim humor, "wouldn't have much use for canned goods. Half a dozen cans were taken, Mary says. I let the bear story stand. I want to keep all this from the girls. No," she explained, replying to Bill's questioning

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glance, "they don't know Charles is drinking again. Joe has just come home from school, and my niece came with her to spend the summer. I — I hope and pray they need not find it out. I have let Charles sleep out in a screened place under the trees, since the weather turned warm. His lungs are affected since he had flu, and the doctor advised it. It gives a sufficient reason for our being here in the desert. Joe wants us to winter in town, but I simply don't — dare. Bill," she stopped until she had controlled a sudden trembling of her lips, "I'm going to need help — some one I can trust. I've *got* to stop this — and keep Joe from finding out, and Barby!"

Bill quite unconsciously straightened his shoulders.

"Don't you fret, Mrs. Marshall," he said quietly. "I'm with you all the way." He smiled hearteningly into her troubled eyes. "I guess I needed to have some one to think of beside myself. I've been a self-centered cuss running around in circles and seeing everything gray and dust-dry and flavorless. I ——"

"You're Woods Morgan!" Mrs. Marshall leaned forward and stared incredulously into his face. "I caught it in your voice when you said 'gray and dust-dry and flavorless'; a kind of deep, singing quality in your voice. And 'I'm with you all the way.' It flashed upon me then. That's the refrain of a poem you read before the D. A. R. four years ago when people had just begun to hear of you. Well!" She drew a long breath and smiled, her face lighting wonderfully.

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"Don't shoot!" Woods threw up his hands in the time-honored signal of defeat. He laughed softly. "I wish you'd forget all about that, Mrs. Marshall. When I take to the tall timber I'm plain Bill Woods and as such I'm a harmless sort of lunatic. But if it makes you any more willing to accept me as reinforcements, just call me Bill and tell me what I can do to help." He sighed. "I hope you won't let it make any difference ——"

"But it does. It makes all the difference in the world." She clasped her fingers together in her lap, still leaning forward with the glow in her eyes. "Not in the way you are afraid I mean — Bill. But you must see that now I shall not be wondering if I am a fool to trust you."

"No-o — you can be sure you are! But seriously, I am going to ask you to keep my secret. I — I *like* to be Bill Woods," he added boyishly. "Besides, there's old Hank, and your husband. He wouldn't trust me an inch if he knew."

"He'd try to hide everything from you," she sighed, coming back to her trouble. "For his own good I'm afraid I must let you spy on him. And — I shall have to go on feeding you in the kitchen, I'm afraid. Do you mind? It's the custom, with — with the help."

Woods chuckled.

"I'll have to ask you for a job, as soon as I get my two feet under me again. Aside from that I think we can safely let matters stand as they are now."

"You're hired — but I'll bet you never milked a

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cow in your life!" Relief had brightened her wonderfully.

"Wrong. I worked for farmers during the summer to pay my way through college, just as every self-made man in America claims to have done. Give me a week to practise up, and I'll bet I can earn my board and keep."

"You'll earn more than you'll ever be paid," she said softly, trouble filling her eyes again with clouds. "I feel almost as if this time I'll win!"

"A man got wise nearly two hundred years ago and said the first and simplest emotion in the human mind is curiosity." Woods smiled whimsically across at the woman who stared at him with a wistful courage in her answering smile. "I always did admit I'm kinda simple. Anyway, I'm curious to know what would happen if that bottle cached by the cowshed should disappear."

"I can tell you what would happen," Mrs. Marshall said with grim certainty. "Charles would go prowling around like — like a cat hunting her kittens. Then he'd brighten up, and I'd know at once that he had either found it or gotten hold of a fresh supply. In this particular instance he would suspect you of taking the bottle and he would order you off the ranch on some pretext; which would force an issue between my husband and me which I wish to avoid."

"All right — I just wondered. Well, now, I feel another simple emotion coming on. I'm curious to know what would happen if something — ipecac for

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example — got into that bottle. I've heard of accidents like that happening to whisky. I wonder what would happen then? They say it sometimes works a cure."

"I wonder if it does." Mrs. Marshall considered the matter and rose, biting her lips. The color was rising to her cheeks and making a handsome woman of her.

"At the far end of the cowshed," murmured Bill, staring straight before him. "Down low, according to the shadow."

Mrs. Marshall gave him a sidelong glance, nodded and left the room.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE REFORM MOVEMENT ASSAILS A POET

"WHISKY," said Charles Marshall gravely, fixing Bill with his watery blue eyes that were now slightly glassy, "is a curse to mankind! I know what I'm talking about, John. Doctors gave it to me one time as a stimulan' — and if I didn't have the stren'th of mind of Napoleon Borgia, I'd be a drunkard to-day! Fact, James, I'd be a drunkard t'day. I tell you, Harry, a man that will yield to the wiles — er — er-r ——" A worried, incredulous look crept into his eyes. He hesitated, gulped once and went hastily outside, and Bill buried his chortles of glee in the pillow.

After a while he heard Marshall go away toward the house, muttering weakly, and Bill saw him no more that day. Mrs. Marshall told him later that Charles had gone to bed. She looked hopeful, and Bill was glad and turned his mind now to other matters, principally to conniving some accidental meeting with Barby. He felt that it would be imprudent to confide the story of the ring to Mrs. Marshall, much as he liked her. He might be letting out a secret which Barby would not want to share with her aunt, or he might be making a fool of himself if Barby were not the girl. He would have to wait and be sure of his ground.

One thing was certain: Barby was not in the slight-

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est degree interested in crippled hoboes, smooth-shaven or otherwise. The shaded yard and the porch where the family foregathered were on the side of the house farthest from the bunk house and Bill could think of nothing that would excuse a crippled hobo in limping where he was not wanted. Even Joe did not think it worth her while to seek him out, and Mrs. Marshall herself was "playing politics" by keeping up the fiction that he was merely the beggar within her gates, so to speak, with no social claims whatever.

Left to himself, therefore, Woods had to find his own ways of passing the time. It occurred to him that it might not be a bad plan to go while the way was clear and find out for himself just where Marshall had hidden the bottle, just how much doctored whisky it contained and about how much damage Marshall's wife had done to what was probably good moonshine. In her zeal she might have dealt out misery with too generous a hand, as Woods told himself is the way of women since Eve. At any rate, he would hobble down to the cowshed and see for himself. There was no danger; Marshall was in bed and Hank was not on the ranch.

The bottle was ridiculously easy to find; so easy that Bill could gauge the degree of drunkenness that had permitted Marshall to thrust the beer bottle carelessly under a scraggy bush with neck and shoulders protruding in plain sight. He took it out and looked at it, shook it, pulled the cork and smelled it. And as he did so he involuntarily lifted his eyes and met the

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horrified, wide-eyed stare of Joe, standing transfixed in the corral with the milk bucket hanging in the crook of her arm and her bobbed hair blowing in a soft, restless halo about her head.

Woods flushed, pushed the cork hastily into the bottle and made an instinctive movement to hide the damning evidence behind him.

"Er — g-good evening," he said lamely, the blood still pumping the crimson hue of guilt into his face.

"You ought to be shot!" Joe took a step toward him, her small teeth grating together and the milking stool balanced threateningly in her right hand. "Throw that bottle away before I brain you with this! If mother knew you brought whisky on to this ranch she'd kill you, just about. I'd tell her, too, only I hate to worry her. Drop that bottle!" She stamped her foot at him, and Woods obediently dropped the bottle into the bush where he had found it. "Hop out of my sight—you poison the air so I can't breathe."

Woods drew in the corner of his lip, angry because he could not explain just how and why appearances lied. She was only a kid, and she mustn't know her daddy was drunk. He retreated to the bunk house and shut himself in to meditate upon the foolishness of following an impulse. Of course he'd have to be the goat now and let the kid turn up her small nose at him for a booze hound. He thought he had better tell her mother what had happened — and then he thought he had better let things slide along. Maybe Joe

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wouldn't say anything, and the matter would blow over. If she told her father there would be the deuce and all to pay; but she wouldn't do that to-night — not with Marshall sick as a dog — and by morning she'd probably forget about it. He comforted himself again with the thought that Joe was only a kid, which merely proved that he did not know Miss Josephine Marshall very well.

Mrs. Marshall gave him a nod and a smile, next morning, which Woods could interpret as he pleased. Joe did not choose to have the air in her vicinity further contaminated and walked wide of the bunk house when she returned from milking and saw him sitting in the doorway. She would not so much as glance his way, which gave Woods the opportunity to observe her more closely than he had done heretofore. An attractive youngster, he admitted grudgingly; going to look a lot like her mother, which meant that she promised to be a handsome woman some day. Even now he wanted to sketch her as she looked in those bib overalls tucked into diamond-patterned golf stockings with low tan shoes. Her slim young throat rose pink and satiny smooth from an old gym. middy with the sleeves cut short, and her bobbed hair waved softly as if invisible fingers were lifting the locks in tender little caresses.

A cute kid, full of pep. She'd have fired that ungodly stool at his head if he had stopped to argue with her. There was a certain free swing to her shoulders as she walked — he could easily imagine her kicking

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through a drift of autumn leaves and whistling to plump robins — “A mountain sprite — Peter Pan of the desert,” he formulated the vision into words, the poet of him awake to the rhyming possibilities she offered.

Mrs. Marshall came down the path to him, a bottle of liniment in her hands.

“I just brought this for an excuse,” she announced with engaging frankness, as Wood rose and stood aside for her to enter if she wished. “The girls have already accused me of warming a serpent in my bosom, or words to that effect. What have you done to my baby Joe? She insists that you are a dangerous character, Bill, and she assures me that I’ll regret it if I fail to order you away from the ranch.”

“Didn’t she give any reason?” Bill gave her one of his swiftly searching glances.

“Nothing but her infallible intuition.” Mrs. Marshall smiled. “Joe simply *knows* that you are beyond her power of description as a criminal. I suggested that you might be all right, and she gave the unanswerable retort of her age. She said, ‘Apple sauce, old dear.’ You know how children are, nowadays. What did you say to her, Bill? What *could* you have said to her?”

Bill’s lips twitched.

“I said good evening. She offered to brain me with the stool if I didn’t leave, so I left.”

“Well. I hope you don’t mind, because I really think we may accomplish more if no one knows who

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you really are. I'm a selfish old woman — but I'm fighting to save my husband and I have no conscience in the matter. Charles," she added, with a worried look in her eyes, "is still in bed and I can't get him to talk. He seems to have something on his mind; more than that bottle, I mean."

Woods had nothing new to offer in the way of suggestions, but she lingered a while longer, talking of her struggle there in the desert and her hope that the fight could be won this summer without fail. She seemed to forget that Bill might possibly have affairs of his own to claim his attention, but swept him into her battle line as calmly as her hand would grasp a weapon made for her use.

"I wish you'd make peace somehow with Joe," she told him in the tone of one giving needed directions. "She's just a child, but it will be difficult to keep you on as a choreman around the place if Joe is set against your being here. She's her daddy's girl. If she doesn't like you, Charles will find some way to get rid of you in spite of me. If you can only win her over, somehow — she's a sweet, tender-hearted little thing and if you can win her sympathy I know she'll do anything in the world for you. You must have startled her, Bill. She'd never admit she's afraid of a stranger but Joe really is extremely shy. I'm sure you can win her over."

"I can try, at least," Bill promised. And that night when Joe had passed with her chin in the air, on her way to milk the cow with the striped horns, Woods

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cuddled his crutches under his arms and followed her to the corral, making sure that she had started milking before he approached. Then, being warned by the nervous side glances of the cow, Joe turned her head and glared at him.

"Miss Joe, I didn't come to explain or — or try to sneak out of anything," Woods began with the deep, singing quality in his voice. "I came to tell you that from now on I am going to try and be a better man."

"Some job," Joe commented heartlessly, after the manner of self-righteous youth that has never known or heeded the command to help the erring brothers of the world.

She turned back to her work, apparently unmoved. But Woods, who was an observing young man, saw that the two little streams of milk were shooting wide of the pail. He smoothed out a grin and went on, speaking humbly.

"I don't hope for such a thing as your forgiveness. What I want is to show you that I can be a man. I hate a whiner, and I ain't trying to make excuses. There ain't none. Your respect is what I'm going to work for. If I can earn that ——"

"Make up your mind to overtime and no lay-offs, then."

Woods stared hard at the back of her head where the wind was lifting wavy locks in that maddening fashion of making each hair a live, sentient thing. He was thinking that the sweet, tender-hearted little thing was not behaving according to her mother's bland

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predictions. Still, she was milking furiously and missing the bucket more times than she hit it, and Woods went by that.

"I don't expect you to believe me; I don't expect anything."

"Oh, yes — you expect to get on the sunny side of me so I won't tell mother."

"I told her myself."

Joe sprang up and faced him, breathing fast.

"You never dared! I don't want mother — oh, what did you go and tell *her* for?"

"I told her I hadn't always been the man I am now. I didn't tell her I drank. Just that from now on I can be trusted."

"Oh." She looked at him uncertainly. "Is that all you told her?"

"I didn't mention — the bottle. That's up to you."

"Oh, is it? Well, I gave you a fair kick-off toward a better, nobler life. I busted that bottle with a rock."

"Did you? I haven't been near it since, so I didn't know. I did some hard thinking last night, Miss Joe. That look of horror in your eyes ——"

"Made you want to be a better, nobler man. I *told* Hank you're the Bill Hart type. Well, you've exceeded your parking limit in this corral, funny face. You better beat it. I've got that tired feeling coming on."

She plumped down again on the stool, balancing like a bicycle rider with her glisteny hair pressed against the cow's tawny flank. The milk streams shot straight

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into the bucket with a pleasant thrumming sound. Woods hesitated, found that indifferent young back more baffling than the wiles of a spoiled beauty, and hobbled away, feeling vaguely disturbed and resentful over his blunt dismissal. An artist in love-making, he had been called upon occasion; an experienced young man, certainly, in studying the varying moods of women — and sometimes turning those same moods into poems and effective bits of character drawing. And he had let a kid in overalls best him in a scene which he had rehearsed with care.

Woods didn't like it. He sulked, that night, and plotted ways of meeting the Girl with the Voice, and planned clever conversations that would soothe his hurt vanity.

CHAPTER NINE

GUILT IS EASILY ALARMED

OLD Hank Hawkins, with his whiskers tucked inside his open shirt collar to keep them out of his cooking, turned a scorched mess of fried corn into a basin and parked the frying pan under the stove.

"There's yer one-handed supper, Thatch. Throw it into yuh. C'm on, Chris. That there's expensive grub. You ask Thatch what it cost 'im!" Hank gave his customary cackle while he poured three cups of muddy coffee.

Chris, a big, raw-boned Dane with the overhanging frontal bone that would have helped Darwin prove his theory of simian ancestry, pulled a box up to the end of the small, cluttered table.

"Yeh, Thatch was tellin' me. Gawsh, I'd give a nickel to 'a' saw Thatch pickin' 'em up and layin' 'em down when the old girl wung 'im. I know Mary — she's shore a pecky nature. I bet them cans bounced a foot off'n Thatch's back at every lope. I betcha a flea couldn't 'a' rode 'im a rod without grabbin' fer hand-holts!" The picture Chris had drawn tickled him so that he rocked back and forth, laughing until his eyes swam with tears.

"Laugh, you damn' fool!" Thatch eased his bandaged left arm in its sling and scowled at Chris. "Next time we run outa grub we'll give you the job of goin' after it."

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"Yeh. Only yuh won't. The old lady shoots a damn sight straighter than Biddy in the kitchen. She shore enough fanned my boot heels that time she ketched me with a demijohn and old Charley steppin' high around the place. I don't go there no more, you betcha."

"Hank coulda went back himself," Thatch complained. "Nothin' but damn' laziness that he didn't pack up what we needed. Come pokin' along up here with a little hunk uh bacon the size of a half plug uh tobacco, and a bottle uh milk and a handful uh coffee and a piece uh butter I could put in my eye! *He* knowed I was outa grub — I give him a list uh things to bring up."

"Yeah, but the old lady might wonder how I was goin' to eat all that grub m'self. You got to look at it from my side, Thatch. Her an' Mary fixed me out — look nice if I'd handed out that list like you told me to! I'll be dogged if I'm goin' to set Mis' Marshall smellin' around to see where s' much can corn an' jam an' honey goes to, up here where I'm s'posed to be workin' alone! Charley, he said himself it wouldn't do t' pack off more'n what I'd natcherly use. And I don't eat honey. Them women *knows* it. Hell, don't I pass up the honey every mornin' I'm there? How 'n hell do yuh expect I'm goin' to make 'em think I eat it up here by the gallon, by gosh, when the damn smell of it makes me sick down at the ranch? Chris, he coulda brung over some stuff from town. It's that or swipe it outa the cellar, nights — and I'll be dogged

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if I kin see how else you're goin' to figger it! It ain't my fault if you went blunderin' around and stirred up Mary. Hell, how was I to know she packed a gun? I never seen it."

"You knowed damn' well we needed honey to make up that bunch uh champagne Charley give yuh the receet fer. Ain't you two got gumption enough to git the stuff out where I c'n come after it without stirring up the hull ranch? What's Charley doin' all this while — loafin' around, eatin' three squares a day and keepin' his hands clean, and I'm off up here livin' ketch as ketch can and eatin' jest whatever you got a notion to pack up to me on that damned lousy back uh yourn. I'm stewin' here over that damn' still ——"

"Say, by gawsh, that makes me think. You wanta git the smell out this camp, somehow. I set a dry officer afoot, back here on the trail. He was out huntin' you, Hank — quizzed around the Center, even went an' tried to pump ole man Brown! Name uh Williams — that's how Bob got wise to 'im. Ast fer Williams mail, and then got scared off somehow, I guess. Bob's been posted t' look out fer Williams. He's been nosin' around Vegas an' Pioche an' kinda workin' over this way. Coupla letters layin' there for 'im, and Bob, he steams 'em open. Mebby Williams seen signs they'd been tampered with. Bob thinks so, b'cause he takes an' looks 'em over an' hands 'em back an' says he ast fer William Woods."

"Well, I'll be dogged!" Hank's hand went up to claw at his whiskers. "William Woods, ay? Bill

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Woods! He ain't no officer, Chris. I an' him was mixed into a minin' deal t'gether. He put up a little money on some claims, coupla years ago."

"Him?" Chris worked his scalp forward and back just as a monkey does when it begins to think. "Gawsh, he didn't look like no miner, Hank. Can't be him."

"Betcha it's the same feller. He *ain't* no miner. Couldn't tell limestone from granite, ner porph'ry from quartz. Show 'im any kinda iron-stained rock an' he'd think it was ore if yuh said so. Kinda simple-minded, t' my notion. Set an' gawp at nothin' by the hour, Bill would."

"What's his business in the hills, then?" Chris leaned forward as if he wanted to meet the answer halfway. "He never named none—'xcept he did have some claims with you, back here in the Grape Vines. An' hinted around to Bob, tryin' to find out if yuh was makin' anything back here. Ast if yuh wasn't *growin' grapes!*"

"Grapes?" Hank and Thatch both stared blankly. Then Hank gave a cackle.

"That's Bill, all right," he declared, positively. "Dogged if that ain't like 'im! Never comes right out—hints around and keeps yuh guessin' what 'n hell he's drivin' at."

"What's he do fer a livin'?"

"Dogged if I know." Hank goggled from one to the other. "He never said. When I'd come out an' ast 'im, he'd grin an' make some damfool remark

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there wasn't no sense to. Said he lied fer a livin', oncet."

"What's that make 'im if it ain't a pro'bition officer?" Chris demanded, working his scalp furiously. "You can't never git one uh them to come out an' say what he is. Hum an' haw, an' not give yuh no satisfaction half the time. 'Tain't likely he'll find this camp atall. I follered 'im up an' took his horses away from 'im an' hazed 'em off over into the lower country. The devil 'imself couldn't find 'em, an' chances is they'll cave in fer want uh water, tryin' t' git back home from where they're at."

"Ain't the horses that was after Hank, was it?" Thatch asked sarcastically. "Why 'n hell didn't yuh haze *him* off where he couldn't git no water?"

Chris licked his tongue along his lips and looked down at his plate.

"Aw, hell, I ain't bumpin' no men off if I kin help it," he defended himself. "I got caught out once with no water, m'self, an' I know what that's like, you bet. B'sides, somebuddy might pick 'im up an' take 'im in — nice thing fer me! No, I swiped most the outfit — all he wasn't sleepin' on — an' left 'im high an' dry. He'd hit back fer the Center, sure thing. Time he got there he'd be ready fer the hospital. Guess he'll make it, all right."

Hank was combing his beard and studying Chris disapprovingly. An uneasy sense of something hidden took hold of him.

"Funny, Bill never said nothin' about somebuddy

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gittin' away with 'is horses," he muttered. "I'll be dogged if I kin see through it!"

"Where'd *you* see 'im?" Chris looked up, alarmed. "I coulda swore he'd hit back fer the Center."

"Where'd I see him?" Hank twisted his beard until it hurt. "At the ranch, where he come limpin' in yistiddy mornin'!"

"Oh, my gawsh!" Chris slumped. "An' ole Charley spillin' the hull works, I'll bet a nickel!"

"Don't you never think Charley'll spill nothin'! Bill ain't no pro'bition officer, nohow. I'll be dogged if he is. Nosey kinda cuss — set up all night askin' fool questions about this an' that, but it was all minin', minin'; boom towns that went dead, an' killin's an' claim jumpin's an' fights fer water. Kep' me up night after night talkin' about them things, but he never done no pumpin' about makin' booze er bootleggin'."

"My gawsh, he wouldn't be worth nothin' to the gov'munt if he did!" Chris spat disgustedly toward the stove. "Gotta git 'im away from there, somehow, if we have t' drag 'im away!"

"Hoppin' on crutches, right now," Hank said gloomily. "Bill may be mean — he's an awnery cuss, I admit — but he ain't no fed'ral officer, er I've missed 'im a mile."

"You don't know a damn thing about it," Thatch said carpingly. "You wasn't makin' it when you and him hooked up b'fore. I know all about that. He seen you wasn't makin' nothin', that's why he never broached the subjeck. I'd take Bob's word fer that,

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er else why 'n hell are we payin' him? He mighta took this gov'munt job sence then. It's been a coupla years; you said yerself."

They talked and talked, Hank repeating Bill's words over and over, Chris doing the same, and the three weighing and comparing and placing a sinister meaning where Bill had meant nothing at all or had idly played upon words. Chris convinced them that the mere fact of Bill Woods coming crippled to the ranch was ominous; a deep-laid plan which the stealing of his horses had helped him carry out.

Bill, they decided, had played a deep game from the very beginning with Hank. His grubstake interest in the claims had given him an excuse for being in the country, a blind that hid his real business. His remark that he was over here on a project of his own was sufficiently ominous, in their opinion. One of them quoted that comforting statement about being forewarned, and they thought it very lucky indeed that their plans had been lately changed and bettered until now they were flawless. And through all their talk ran a deep resentment against Bill Woods who had practised deceit upon a man who had trusted him.

"Played it slick, dogged if he didn't!" Hank grumbled self-pityingly. "Come to the ranch s' lame he couldn't walk hardly. Folks jest *had* to take 'im in. Ankle swole up big as yer head an' black as tar. He shore played that slick, if he done it a-purpose."

"Well, that gives us time enough t' head 'im off," said Chris. "Bob thought I oughta bump 'im, but

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hell! I couldn't bump nobody. I'm too darn soft, I guess. How about you, Hank?"

"Who, me?" Hank pulled at his beard nervously. "Needn't think you kin make me solo this hand, Chris. I pass." He grinned slily. "I'm nothin' but a fool prospector that went in pardners with Bill. Mebby I might have t' take 'im out to the claims, if he gits anxious about 'em, but I'll be dogged if I'm goin' t' git all het up over it." He looked from one to the other and cackled triumphantly. Let them do the worrying. Hank himself felt safe enough.

CHAPTER TEN

WOODS GROWS ROMANTIC

BEYOND the regularly spaced young trees the hot sageland stretched mile upon mile to a mountain range of piled purple that gave the sky line a splotchy look, as if the bluing had run out of the sky and collected there at the edge of the world in an uneven blot. In the grove were other ragged spots of darker coloring than the earth — scant patches of shade cast by immature foliage. Nearer the house a surprisingly green lawn spread down the slope from the rocky edge of the bluff, and at the top of the lawn a more surprising pool edged with bronze-leaved cannas lay inviting reflections from the poplars and the clouds. Out near the center of the pool an astonishing black swan floated with his neck curved in that pose of studied gracefulness which artists copy so often.

Beside the pool Woods limped and pushed a lawn mower straight ahead toward the house, going slowly and lifting cautious glances from under his eyebrows, about every third step. The Girl with the Voice was curled up in a hammock on the porch, and Woods was slowly adding to his meager bits of information concerning her appearance, mood and general approachableness. So far he had not accomplished much in the way of approach. The lawn stopped abruptly ten feet from the porch to make room for a graveled walk,

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and Woods had stopped with the lawn and turned reluctantly back along the fresh-cut swath. He walked faster, going in that direction.

On his fourth return to the deadline of gravel he glanced over his shoulder toward the pool, pulled off his hat and crossed the walk, standing at the foot of the steps. He simply had to hear her speak. He had to know, once for all, about her voice.

She was holding a book up before her face, so she did not see him. Woods held his hat in front of him, feeling along the rim in good old rural style, and cleared his throat.

"Excuse me, miss. Your swan's down."

Barby sat up straight and stared.

"Wha-at?"

"Your swan's down, miss." He had the deep, singing quality in his voice, and his face was very grave.

She glanced quickly toward the pool. The black swan was standing on his head, trying for the nine thousandth time to peck through the screen cage and murder a goldfish with a luxuriant silver tail.

"My swan's down! What do you mean?"

"I thought Aunt Henrietta ——"

"Well?" she had waited for him to finish the sentence, but Bill did not seem to think it needed finishing. "What did you think about Aunt Henrietta?"

"I — I thought Aunt Henrietta's swan."

"Oh, Barb, you're the dumbest thing!" Joe's shining head appeared in the open window beside the hammock, and immediately Joe crawled out, laughing hi-

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lariously. "Bill's spoofing you — don't you *get* it? He said, 'Your swansdown. Aunt Henry *et 'er.*' Bill, I didn't think you had it in you." She laughed afresh, staring at Bill with new interest. "When did you think up that priceless gem?"

"I dunno." Bill backed a step. He had not figured Joe into his calculations. "That swan — he worries me, honest. Twice to-day I've had to wade out and turn the darn thing right side up. Seems kinda top-heavy or something. He'll git water in his carburetor if he don't look out. I thought if Aunt Henrietta ——" He turned his eyes anxiously upon Barby, who was leaning toward him, her cheeks pinker than they had been.

"Well? If Aunt Henrietta what?"

"I dunno, Miss Barby. That's what I been wondering. I've been hearing you go around the place saying Aunt Henrietta — Aunt Henrietta — but I can't seem to find out what it was she et."

Joe shrieked with laughter, as is the habit with girls of a certain age.

Barby opened her lips to smite him down with words, thought she wouldn't waste breath on him, and ended by throwing her book at him.

Bill caught it easily with one hand, glanced at it and felt a queer chill run up into his back hair. He stared incredulously at its familiar title, "Sand Dunes and Sage." It occurred to him that he never would have dared to have a thing like this happen in a story; it would look so far-fetched and stagey.

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"Oh, Po'try," he mumbled, smoothing down the pages.

"Don't you ever think it. That's blah. One of mother's tea hounds got a wild fit and tried to write something about the desert. It's a scream." Joe turned up her nose literally.

"Ain't it good po'try?" His eyes went past Joe and rested on Barby's crimson face.

"What's that to the hired man?" Barby spoke with a contemptuous drawl. "Nothing's good in this awful place, if you want my opinion. And you're about the awfulest thing the desert contains. I don't see what Aunt Henrietta — what Auntie's thinking of — oh, I could kill you!" Fresh color pumped into her cheeks as she flounced out of the hammock and into the house, slamming the screen door viciously behind her.

"Bill, you're priceless!" Joe sat down on the top step and clasped her hands around her knees. "I believe you've got at least one cell of a brain, somewhere about you. Why, it never struck me before, what a funny name mother's got. But you've fixed yourself with Barb, old thing. She'll poison you for that if she gets a chance."

"I'm sorry." Bill was turning the leaves of his latest volume of verse and mentally agreeing with Joe that most of it was blah. He had been pretty stale when he wrote that stuff. "I only wanted to cheer her up, kinda. She looked lonesome and kinda sad."

"Why didn't you shoot her?" Joe inquired mildly.

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"That might have pleased her more. Barby's been wanting to die, ever since she came here."

Bill did not think of any reply to that.

"Have you — well, are you still leading a noble life?" Joe looked at him, the mockery of her smile refuted by the shy earnestness in her eyes.

"I'm sure trying, Miss Joe." To himself he was wondering whether that broken engagement had anything to do with Barby's wanting to die. And how could he manage that ring business, since she seemed to have mighty little sense of humor?

"Would you — would you sign a pledge to keep from — you know?"

Bill stared at Joe uncomprehendingly for a minute before he could quite understand what the girl was talking about.

"Oh — why, yes. Would it help?"

"Of course it would. It puts you on your honor more. If you've signed your name to a thing you know you've *got* to keep it." Joe spoke with perfect assurance. "I'll write up a pledge, if you'll sign it, Bill. You seem intelligent, in some ways, and since I'm into it now, I may as well help out. There isn't much to do around here, anyway. I get a kick out of you, sometimes." She giggled reminiscently. "Golly grandma, but Barby was mad! Honest, did you think that up yourself, Bill? I mean the swan business."

"It sort of come to me," Bill declared modestly. "I wish it hadn't. I didn't want to hurt her feelings. I think she's wonderful and beautiful."

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"Oh, you do? How sweet and romantic."

Bill's eyes lingered studiously on Joe's face, innocent of all expression, yet by that very blankness expressing much. He wondered fleetingly how old was Joe, but he knew better than to ask the girl now.

"I'll write that pledge so you can sign it before supper," Joe said briskly, coming back to her matter-of-fact mood.

"Mince pie for supper?" Bill queried interestedly.

"No, foolish. But this is my lucky day and I'll give you the benefit. I'll take that Woods Morgan mush in to mother. She thinks it great stuff."

Woods mowed desultorily until Joe returned and called to him and waved a paper, when he left the mower at the other end of the pool and went to the house. He signed a fearfully binding pledge with Joe's school fountain pen, barely remembering in time that he was not expected to write any name save William Woods.

"Miss Barby mad at me yet?"

"Yes, she is. Now, will you be sure and keep this promise, Bill?" Joe looked at him soberly. "It's frightfully important in ways I don't care to explain — though, of course, I'm interested in the welfare of your soul, too. This says you are not to touch, taste or handle intoxicating liquor in any form. You'll keep that, won't you, Bill?"

"Yes," said Bill in his vibrant baritone. "You tell Miss Barby that I'm awful sorry I hurt her feelings."

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"Well, forevermore! Is *that* all you care about reforming?" Joe glared and left him with her chin held high.

Woods finished cutting the grass and pushed the mower into the tool shed. This was his first day in the employment of the Marshalls and on the whole it had not been devoid of interest, though he could have done better with certain parts of it on a second trial, he thought. But time very seldom turns backward just to give us another chance, and as Bill scraped the dottle from his pipe he cast about for a new method of approaching Barby on the morrow. She couldn't or wouldn't take a joke, that was certain. It should be a simple matter to go up to her and give her the ring, explain how he chanced to have it in his possession and beat a retreat. But Bill wanted more than a bare chance to restore a bit of jewelry; he wanted to get acquainted with Barby and become friends with her. There was something about the girl that appealed to his imagination and stirred his interest. Certainly she was not the sweet-Alice type of girl, and Bill admired spunk, as he admitted to himself.

Bill heard Joe's voice, singing the latest blues, and his eyebrows came together. Joe was going to complicate matters between Barby and himself, unless he was very careful. A kid like that, always popping up when she was least expected or wanted, was a dangerous element in any romance. Here she came to the bunk house and looked in at Bill exactly as if he were some wild animal which she had captured and was

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trying to tame. Bill didn't like her manner, and he chose to ignore her presence.

"Barby thinks it's a crime for a dud of a hired man to have such a wonderful figure and a perfect voice for love-making," Joe told him abruptly. "I told her you've quit drinking and are going to lead a nobler life. Maybe you'd rather have Barby for your guiding star, Bill. I noticed your eyes were kind of gooey when you looked at her, and Barb's had lots of experience with men. She's just welched on an engagement and wishes she hadn't, and won't give in. Maybe I'd better turn you over to her. Barb might get a kick out of reforming you. Shall I?"

Bill looked at her, speechless for the moment. Joe's mental processes were beyond him.

"Do you want to?"

"Just as you say. I'm going to start in training my pup to follow tracks, so I'll have plenty on my mind, if you'd rather gaze into Barby's eyes and get your daily heart-throb. Barby's eyes are guaranteed to give lonesome hearts that throbby feeling, I believe. Didn't she make you want to be noble to-day, Bill?"

Bill was busy getting his pipe to draw and did not answer — since it was not permitted him to say what was really in his mind.

"Well, think it over, chatterbox." Joe gave him a last searching look and went on to the house, whistling to her pup, looking as if she had never had a care or an emotion in her life.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE FIRST VICTIM

WOODS couldn't find his typewriter. He couldn't find the roll of blankets thrust into a crevice in the ledge behind the spring. Neither could he locate the gulch that held the spring. He had thought that it would be a simple matter and had waited until he could walk without crutch or cane before he started off one Sunday morning, thinking that he would retrieve his stuff and write some verses that had been pestering his poetic imagination for days. He had slipped away unseen for the very good reason that he did not want Joe on his trail. She and her pup Lobo, a leggy animal of the German police dog blood, with a silent nature and suspicious eye, might use his tracks for practice work. The two of them were much more inquisitive than Bill liked to see them, and their interest in everything that moved about the place was becoming a nuisance. Woods liked dogs, but Joe had conceived the idea of making Lobo a "one-man" dog and would not let any one speak to the pup, which she kept on a leash or chained to his kennel just outside her window. Bill did not know, but he suspected Joe of having secret ambitions to own another "Strongheart."

It had not occurred to him that he would mistake the very gulch down which he had toiled in agony. He had thought it would be a simple matter to return to the spring, shoulder his bundle and carry it down

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to where he could easily get it at night and bring it into the bunk house unseen by that terrible young person whose eyes missed nothing that went on about the ranch during daylight. But much to Bill's surprise, there were several gulches leading off from the one broad gully that ended just beyond the corral corner, and they all looked pretty much alike to him. Furthermore, he decided that he must have misjudged the distance he had walked — or hobbled, to be exact. He would have sworn that the spring was no more than half a mile from the ranch, yet he ranged up and down and across a radius of more than a mile, judged roughly, and found nothing that resembled the spot where he had spent two nights and a day.

He was late for Sunday dinner and he was conscious of Joe's eyes upon him as she walked through the kitchen with bones for Lobo. He glanced up with a slight smile that recognized her brief presence, but Joe's gaze did not soften in the slightest degree. She looked as if he had done her some personal injury and he wondered what it could be, until his attention was caught by Mary, who was behaving in a peculiar manner that not even her kind of disposition would warrant.

Mary was leaning against the sink, rolling up her sleeves and nodding slowly with her teeth clenched. She looked exactly as if she were making ready for a fight.

"Anything on your mind?" Woods dipped more whipped cream over his pudding.

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"Work an' slave — work an' slave," Mary muttered, sullen resentment in her voice, and repeated the phrase over and over in a kind of chant, rolling and unrolling her sleeves. Abruptly she heaved herself away from the sink, started for the dining room with a stride that made Woods push back his chair ready to follow her if necessary. But at the door she paused, considered something and nodded again, her lips tightly closed. She turned and went into the pantry, closing the door violently behind her.

Woods ate his pudding slowly and waited, loading his pipe to kill time when he could eat no more. He got up and poured more coffee for himself, listened with one ear tilted toward the closed door and finally sat down again, sipping black coffee and watching the door. From the pantry came a crash of crockery, and a groan. Woods sprang up and pulled open the door, stared at what he saw and stooped, trying to lift the heavy, inert body that lay huddled in a heap of basins that had come down as she lurched against them. The pantry held the unmistakable odor of whisky, and Mary's breath reeked with it. Woods let her lie back against the wall until he had found the bottle, a pint flask almost empty.

He did not know what he could do about it, save letting Mrs. Marshall know and perhaps helping move the woman to her room. It would be impossible to conceal the fact that Mary was drunk — her breath advertised the fact to any one who came near her. Woods turned to leave the pantry just as Joe came in

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with her empty plate, and though he closed the door quickly behind him, the girl's keen eyes had seen enough to halt her in the middle of the room, her eyes fixed accusingly upon him.

"Well, that's about the way I expected you to keep your promise. You didn't bring any more whisky on to the ranch until you could walk, did you!"

Woods discovered that he held the damning whisky flask in his hand, and his face grew red.

"Mary got hold of some. I think you'd better call your mother out here. I can't carry the old girl alone."

"You don't even deny it!"

"Deny what? You'd only call me a liar." He looked at her coldly.

"Well, you might at least give me that much satisfaction," cried Joe. "It would show you're ashamed of being caught, anyway. Peddling hooch to our cook! Nice business, I must say!"

"I did not. Wherever Mary got it, I don't know."

"Of course not. Well, you may as well own up where it's cached, because it's going to be smashed the minute I see it."

Bill took a step toward her, his eyes angry. But after all she was only accepting the evidence against him, and he was fair enough to admit that the thing looked all against him.

"I wish you could locate it. Why don't you put your pup to trailing Mary? I've a hunch she's been lifting a little right along, when she could find any. Get your dog on her tracks."

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Mrs. Marshall appeared in the doorway, wondering what Joe was arguing about with Bill. Behind her came Barby, and the tall figure of Mr. Marshall brought up the rear. They stared at Bill and at Joe. Bill held up the bottle for them to see.

"Mary's laid out, and I got this out of her apron pocket," he stated baldly. "I suggested to Joe that her dog might be able to track Mary to where she found this. And I suppose we ought to get her to bed if we can carry her. She's too much for me to handle alone."

Charley Marshall came forward, glancing furtively from one to the other, his eyes full of questions and his lips afraid to utter a word. Bill motioned to him and opened the pantry door. The stertorous breathing of the fallen cook made them draw back a bit. It didn't sound right, somehow, even for a drunken slumber. Mrs. Marshall's eyes sought Bill's and found them grave.

"It — do you suppose it's a stroke of some kind? She's so purple ——"

"But she had this in her pocket." Bill held up the flask. "Mr. Marshall, if you can carry her by the knees, I'll take her shoulders." He stepped over the unconscious bulk and lifted the lolling head. Mary was certainly looking and sounding rather alarming.

Together the two men heaved and staggered out of the narrow space with their burden. Mary was a large woman and much heavier than she looked to be. Barby came up and helped Bill carry her, saying not a

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word but taking it all as a matter of course, except that her eyes widened whenever she glanced into Mary's face.

There did not seem to be anything much to do after they had laid the woman on her bed. Bill stepped to the door and threw the flask as far as he could send it up the rocky hillside, turning to find Marshall and Barby watching him curiously.

"You shouldn't have done that," said Barby. "It might have been poisoned, and now we'll never know."

"You ought to have kept that," said Marshall. "Ah — she may need a stimulant when she comes out of that stupor." And he added, "I'd like to know where she got hold of that!"

Mrs. Marshall joined them on the back porch, looking pale and frightened and a bit desperate.

"There hasn't been a soul on the ranch but ourselves, so far as I know," she said, under her breath. "How could she have got hold of that? Do you suppose she has had it for some time, and just to-day began drinking?"

"She might," said Bill, though he looked skeptical. "I've wondered if Mary didn't like a little nip now and then; her face shows certain signs — and I felt an atmosphere of something of the sort."

"I wonder ——" Mrs. Marshall looked at Bill significantly, and Bill made a negative signal, scarcely perceptible unless one watched for it.

"An outrage!" babbled Marshall. "Dead drunk under our very roof, on a Sunday afternoon! Henri-

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etta, I shall expect you to discharge the woman immediately."

"Oh, we'll wait and see what she has to say about it, Charles," his wife dissented wearily. "Mary has been with us more than a year, you must remember. I never before suspected her of anything like this."

"I did," Bill said again, looking straight at Mrs. Marshall. "But I never saw anything wrong, until to-day."

Joe came up, looking as if she had just returned from directing an execution and was still in the mood to dispense justice in its grimmest form, but she did not say anything except to state a fact succinctly.

"Well, Lobo and I found where she got it. I smashed the bottle with a rock." She gave Bill one murderous glance and went into the house.

Her father licked his lips and drew a long breath. Bill got the impression that for some reason Marshall had not known of that bottle and was feeling rather sick over it all. Barby turned and followed Joe. There seemed nothing to do about it, at least until Mary recovered enough to explain. He did not feel that the unhappy incident called for discussion, and he was turning away with the intention of retreating to the bunk house when Barby came bursting out among them, incredulous horror in her face.

"Auntie, she's stopped breathing! She — oh, I wish you'd come!"

They all went hurrying into the hot little room off the kitchen, though Marshall and Bill stopped just

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within the door until Mrs. Marshall turned helplessly and looked at them. They went forward then and stared at the figure on the bed, a collapsed figure pathetically clothed in the garb of a careful house-worker — she who would never stir a finger again in this world.

"She *can't* be — dead," said Mrs. Marshall dully. "That's perfectly ridiculous. Why, she cooked our dinner!"

"Heart trouble, maybe," said Woods, though he doubted it. "Better try ammonia, if you've got any."

"I — I think I'd better go for a doctor," Marshall stuttered with his eyes on his wife.

Woods stood up, after making what simple tests he could.

"Better make it the coroner," he said grimly. "No use in pretending we don't know she's dead. Apoplexy, I'd say. It has been hot to-day, and standing over a hot stove — and then that moonshine whisky. It looks simple enough, once you face the thing."

It might be simple enough, but it was hard to face so abrupt a tragedy. Mrs. Marshall was helped to her own room in a state of collapse, and Joe remained with her in wide-eyed horror. Marshall got out the car and went tearing down the sandy trail that twisted snakily through the sagebrush toward Goldfield, and the house took to itself a sinister kind of peace, like the blank silence after some terrific explosion.

Woods it was who pulled a sheet over the unlovely body that was nevertheless taking to itself a dignity

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which Mary in all her life had never possessed. He drew down the cheap green blind and closed the door, and after that he went to work on the dinner dishes as a matter of course, bachelor camps having taught him the rudiments of housekeeping. Barby came out of her aunt's room, pinned a clean dish towel around her slim waist and brought out the dishpan, laying her palm against the water tank to see how hot it was. Bill tried to keep his eyes on his work but she looked up suddenly and caught him staring at her, and she bit her underlip and turned away.

"This is simply awful," she said, gathering the glasses into a group on the table. "I can't make it seem real, somehow."

"It wouldn't help anybody if you could," Woods told her quietly, "so you'd best put it out of your mind as much as possible. I'll wash the dishes. You keep your hands out of the dishpan." He began to roll up his sleeves and was sharply reminded of that last ominous act of Mary's.

"My hands have been in dishwater before now — and they will be again, no doubt." But she picked up the towel and stood waiting for the glasses and silver.

Woods looked at her from the corner of his eye. It would be funny if she were told — well, why not? At least it would take her thoughts away from what lay in the next room.

"Maybe they'll be wearing diamonds," he began awkwardly. "Diamonds and dishwater don't get on very well together, they tell me. I can kinda imagine

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how one would look on your finger; a big, solitary diamond, say, set in platinum; maybe a vine carved on the ring part and kinda curling up around so each hook that holds the diamond in is the point of a leaf, with teeny little diamonds you can think is a drop uh dew, in the middle of each leaf. I — er — it'd look swell, wouldn't it?"

Barby did not drop the glass she was drying, because she set it down on the table. She stood looking at Bill with her lips parted and her eyes two shades darker than normal. Bill flashed a glance at her, saw that he had shot straight, and pulled a smile away from his mouth. For the moment they had both forgotten Mary.

"Where did you ever see a ring like that?" Barby asked sharply, reaching for another glass. "Or didn't you?"

"Funny thing — yes, I did. I — found one. Last spring, it was. I was ——"

"Well? Where did you find it?"

"On the beach at Venice." Now that he was face to face with a situation often worked out in great detail in his imagination, Woods was finding it extremely difficult to tell Barby the truth. He shrank from letting her know how much he knew, though he had expected to enjoy the telling.

"Oh. I wonder if it could possibly be my ring! I had one exactly like the ring you describe. I — lost it at Venice, on the seventeenth day of April. Somewhere above the pier ——"

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"I'll bet it's the same one." Bill dried his hands on the kitchen towel, fumbled inside his shirt and pulled out a little chamois bag. "I just hung on to it till I could find the owner. I guess you'll know all right if it's yours."

She held out her hand, palm up, and he dropped the ring into it. He watched Barby's fingers close over it while she stared hard at the wall with that blank, unfocused look that tells of mental pictures blotting out reality. Her lips drooped rather piteously.

"Yours, huh?"

Barby pulled herself out of her abstraction with a sharp sigh. She looked down at the ring, slipped it on her finger and took it off again immediately. She glanced up at Bill and nodded.

"Yes. It must have — dropped into the sand. I — I'm awfully glad you found it, Bill, and — thank you so much." She slid the ring on her left hand once more and went on wiping dishes with swift precision.

Well, the adventure had fallen flat. Bill felt a queer impulse to laugh and swear at the same time, admitting that the joke was on him and that he had somehow missed all the dramatic possibilities and most of the romance. He was a heck of a plot builder, he thought disgustedly, while he scraped chicken gravy off the plates, washed them with meticulous care, dipped them into a pan of hot water and stood them on edge in another pan where Barby picked them up

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daintily, the diamond flashing impudently on the third finger of her left hand.

"Engagement ring, hunh?" Bill could not permit the incident to close in that fashion.

"Why, yes. I was so sorry to lose it." Barby set down the last plate and stood calmly waiting while Bill scraped the edge of a bowl where mashed potato had dried. "I wonder if there'll be an inquest," she added irrelevantly, when Bill had rinsed the bowl.

"Guess not. Inquests are a lot of bother and the doctor'll know what ailed her." Bill's tone was brusque.

"I don't think the poor thing had any relatives. It seems awful, the way a person can drop right out of life in a few minutes. Think of it—the way she cooked this dinner, and now she's dead before the dishes are washed. It's frightful."

"Old fellow with the scythe does sneak up on folks kinda sudden, sometimes," Bill conceded. "I'd like it that way, myself."

"Let me go quickly, like a candle-light
Snuffed out just at the heyday of its glow!
Give me high noon — and then let it be night!
Thus would I go."

Barby stared at him curiously, looked down at the frying pan he was washing, looked back into his face and opened her mouth. But whatever she had meant to say she kept behind her lips. She stole frequent

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glances at his face, at his hands, and she was very quiet after that.

Bill methodically washed the table, the dishpan and even gave the teakettle a swipe or two. It might be that he wanted to prolong the job, though he did not attempt to carry the conversation along any farther. Barby sat down on the doorstep and gazed at her ring, twisting it absently this way and that, so that it sparkled in the fading light. Bill stepped past her and stood on the porch, abstractedly filling his pipe and lifting his eyes frequently to the garishly tinted clouds.

"Poor Mary!" he said under his breath in an impulse of pity for the barren life that had held so little and had gone so abruptly. "Here's hoping the old girl collects some joy in the next world — if there is one. Has it struck you that Mary *knows*? We'll go on guessing at the riddle, and Mary knows the answer right now. Let's hope it pleases her."

Barby's head was bent and she was turning her diamond ring round and round. Bill pulled his gaze away from the sunset and looked at her. A slight movement of her shoulders told him that she was crying — and he somehow hoped the tears were for Mary lying dead beyond the rock wall.

CHAPTER TWELVE

OF COURSE HANK DOESN'T KNOW

AN undertaker's car came with the coroner at dawn. Bill helped Barby and Joe with the dismal breakfast and dish-washing afterwards, did the milking and fed the chickens and comported himself generally as a hired man who can rise to meet emergencies. He helped the coroner and the undertaker's man and watched the family drive off the next day to attend the funeral in sheer pity for Mary's friendlessness.

The mystery of the moonshine liquor remained as black a mystery as ever, except to Joe, who thought she knew all about it and would not speak to Bill if she could help it. Mrs. Marshall was too upset to discuss the matter at all and Barby could not be expected to show any particular interest in what did not concern her. So Bill was thrown upon his own mental resources. His suspicion swung naturally to Hank and stuck there; at least for a time.

But Hank returned to the ranch, that day of the funeral, with a back-load of silver samples and what Bill could only call a change of heart. He had gone away mumbling accusations against his erstwhile partner, but he must have done a good deal of anxious thinking, for he returned with an apology for his general orneriness, and the old friendliness that had won Bill Woods in the first place. Bill, to tell the truth, did not know what to make of Hank, who was so

Of Course Hank Doesn't Know

sincerely shocked at the news of Mary's death that Bill was convinced in spite of himself. Still, he was determined to crowd the old fellow into a corner and get the truth out of him, and with that purpose he became blunt and uncompromising. He knew Hank pretty well. The old duffer couldn't lie to him and get away with it, he told himself grimly.

"Hank," he said evenly, "you must know where Marshall gets his whisky."

Hank jumped and reached for his whiskers, just as Bill expected.

"Whisky?" Hank looked at him blankly. "Bill, believe it or not, I don't know a damn thing about it."

"Mean to say you don't know how Mary got hold of the stuff that killed her? Now, look here, Hank. I've been a good friend to you and I want the truth. Mary took a shot at some one who was prowling in the cellar, the night after I came. Sunday she got hold of some whisky somehow that — well, to put it bluntly, it killed her, Hank. I don't say it was *meant* to kill her, still ——"

"Good hell!" Hank's mouth dropped half open. "Bill, you shorely can't think that *I* done it?" He swallowed. "What was it, Bill? Poison?" He reached abstractedly for the "makin's" of a cigarette. "B'lieve it er not, Bill, I never knowed Mary ever teched a drop. I know —— Bill, this here is confidential, jest between you 'n' me, Bill — I knowed Marshall likes a nip now an' then. I'll own up that I've took a nip with 'im. But jest here lately, Bill, I

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— well, call it cold feet if yuh want to, but I made up m' mind t' cut it out. I'll be dogged if I want the resk of it. I swear I don't know a thing about any whisky on the ranch right lately, Bill."

Bill raised his eyelids slowly and studied Hank's face which was pasty with fear. Hank's eyes met his beseechingly.

"Well, I'm damned if I don't believe you, Hank — and I had made up my mind you were the nigger in the woodpile. You acted so queer when I showed up here and you beat it so quickly, I was justified in pinning it to you."

"Uh-huh." Hank spilled tobacco recklessly. "I did git kinda rattled, like, when you come limpin' in here afoot. I'd went an' backed down on doin' the work on them two claims of ourn because Marshall had a scheme that looked better to me. But I dunno — I made up m' mind, Bill, that mebbly I was headed wrong. I got t' thinkin'. And seein' you're over here now, I'm willin' t' drop this here deal with Marshall if yuh say so."

Bill smoked a while, watching Hank. If he were wrong in his suspicions, then Hank might be a valuable ally, he thought. At any rate, he was in a fair way to find out all that Hank knew.

"I tell yuh, Bill. Charley Marshall, he did git holt of a dang good claim, back here in the hills, and he offered me a half int'rest in it if I'd work it fer 'im. I went up an' took a look at it, an' I uncovered a vein of high-grade silver. Jest a stringer — may pinch out,

Of Course Hank Doesn't Know

and then agin it may open up into quite a pocket. It's a gopherin' propersition as it stands now, but it looks like quick money whilst it lasts. I bin takin' out ore — got a few sacks out 'n' ready t' pack down if he says the word. 'Course, half of it's mine accordin' t' the agreement. It can be shipped by express an' still make good money. Or Charley can maybe sell it t' some of these mines up toward Goldfield that's shippin' right along. But Bill, if you say so, I'll drop out 'n' go back on our claims. I don't want you sh'd think I'm tryin' t' git the best of yuh, noway. You put good money into them claims an' you got a right t' say."

"All right, tell me your honest opinion, Hank."

"Well," said Hank dully, "my honest opinion is what I told yuh when yuh showed up here. It's what I wrote, only I guess you never got the letter. They's got to be more money spent b'fore we can git out a dime. 'Tain't like this Whistlerock claim uh Marshall's, where they's high-grade silver 'n' gold right close t' the surface. Ourn has got t' be sunk on, an' maybe then we wouldn't git shippin' ore; not good enough t' pay fer the trouble in gittin' it out. That there's the Gawd's truth, Bill."

Bill thought a while.

"And you haven't brought any whisky down to Marshall lately? I'm mighty curious about how he gets it, Hank."

"I'd tell yuh, Bill, if I'd brung any here. I ain't. Not a dang drop. I bin up here diggin' out ore. I

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kin take yuh right up there 'n' show yuh right where I bin workin'." He cocked a cunning eye at Bill. "Yuh may be a fed'ral off'ser, fer all I know, Bill, but even if yuh was, I ain't got nothin' t' hide ner cover up."

"I'm not," Bill grinned. "All the same, I mean to find out if I can where Marshall gets his whisky. I'm beginning to think it comes from Goldfield. I know he brought back something when he came with the coroner, but I've an idea it's wine. And I've been hunting the place over for it. I can't find it."

"Wine, hunh? I never knowed 'im t' drink anything s' mild as wine, Bill."

"I think Mary's dying with a bottle of whisky — a small flask, it was — in her pocket scared the old fellow out. The doctor couldn't tell, of course, without performing an autopsy, whether the whisky was doped or not, but he said it was undoubtedly the whisky that killed her. I think Marshall will lay off the stuff for a while, anyway."

"Dang good thing if he does," Hank grunted. "I want t' see some money made this summer outa this claim. Even with silver down where it is he's got some dang good ore, Bill. But as I say, I'll drop 'er cold if yuh want I sh'd go t' work on them claims of ourn."

"No," said Bill carelessly, "go ahead on this Marshall claim if you like, Hank. I've got a job here and I like it. I think I'd like to stick around here for a while."

Of Course Hank Doesn't Know

"Suits me fine. I mighta knowed you'd be reasonable about it, Bill. Kinda riled me when you come here actin' like you was primed fer trouble, but shucks! They ain't no sense in that. I do kinda want t' git holt of a stake uh m' own, 'fore we do any more work fer ourselves. Feller needs a little money by 'im. Now this ore here; if Charley's a mind t' haul it out ——"

The talk drifted to mining, and Hank showed his samples and explained just why and how that particular ore would be a profitable shipping ore, even on a small scale. Woods listened carefully, watching for a false note and confessing to himself before the day was done that Hank rang true in every particular, except that he was vague and uneasy when the subject of whisky was mentioned. He decided that Hank had probably been guilty in the past but for some reason had resolved to keep himself on the safe side in the future. Which might be either a help or a handicap in the work of reformation which Bill had undertaken.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE HORSES RETURN AS MYSTERIOUSLY AS THEY LEFT

Now that he had taken Bill into his confidence there seemed to be no cloud on Hank's honest intentions. He helped Bill with the chores, and when the Marshalls returned he called Charley to the bunk house, showed him the samples and explained just what he had done and how much ore he had taken out ready to pack down to where a truck could pick it up. There was not the slightest evidence that he wanted to talk his business over privately with Marshall, and in spite of Bill's watchfulness there was no hint of anything hidden between the two. Marshall was unusually silent and his eyes were bloodshot and dull, but that was easily explained by his broken sleep and his two trips to Goldfield. Bill wondered if Marshall were not really frightened into temperance. He hoped so.

"I'll see Nelson about a couple of horses," he said in a tired voice. "Perhaps I can get him to go along and help get the ore down, though that sort of thing is not included in our contract. Or maybe Bill, here, can handle horses well enough to take a hand. It won't be much of a job, will it? If it's going to be costly getting it down to the road, it may not pay to bother with it."

"Ain't much work," Hank replied, combing his whiskers meditatively. "Git two horses an' lend me Bill, here, for a coupla days, an' I kin have it all down

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here. One horse oughta carry two sacks to a load, easy. I only got ten sacks out."

"Well, it's just an experiment, of course. I'll get the little truck from Nelson and haul the ore myself. Then I'll see what arrangements I can make in Goldfield."

"Whatever became of your two burros, Hank?" Bill asked suddenly. "I should think they'd come in handy now."

"Would if I had 'em," Hank grumbled. "Them two burros was stole off me, early this las' spring. Thought I wrote yuh about that, Bill." His eyes went slowly to meet Marshall's inquiring gaze. "Yeah, Bill an' me's knowed each other quite a while. Guess I told yuh. Well, dogged if them burros wasn't stole right f'm under my dang nose, one night. I've hunted the hills over an' I never did see no signs of 'em. Dawggone good jacks, too. Wisht I had 'em."

"That's funny," Bill opined. "Same thing happened to me, back here — and before I leave this country I'm going to know where those horses went to." Then he told the two of what had befallen him just over the summit of the mountain.

"I'll be dogged!" Hank hitched himself to a new position on the bench outside the door, where the three had made themselves comfortable in the shade. "Bill, I seen a coupla horses jest off the trail, up here. Moggin' along this way. Wasn't more 'n two er three mile back. What fer lookin' horses was them yuh lost?"

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Bill described them in detail, a certain eagerness in his voice. He had made and abandoned several plans for trying to trace those horses without calling upon the sheriff.

"I'll be dogged!" Hank gave a shrill cackle. "Bill, if them ain't yore horses, I'll eat 'em raw! I didn't git close to 'em, but they was a brown an' a sorrel an' the sorrel was taggin' the brown. I shore wisht now that I'd 'a' hazed 'em in. But I had these here samples on m' back an' I didn't want no extry walkin'."

Marshall's eyes went from Bill's face to Hank's. He did not seem particularly interested in the horses but he did rouse himself listlessly to offer advice.

"If you'll walk down around the bend in the road, Bill, I venture to say you'll see your horses feeding somewhere close to a fenced patch of alfalfa I've got there. There's a ditch along the upper side, and that and the green stuff along the fence would attract them. In fact, I saw a brown horse over by the field as we came along, and thought it was one Nelson had turned out. You'll find a rope at the corral. Maybe you'd better take a little barley along, or something."

He resumed his languid air, rubbing the ash collar off his cigar bought in Goldfield. But his eyes followed Bill as he went off to the corral, walking with the slight limp that remained as a gentle reminder of his hurt. He was still sitting in the shade of the bunk house when Bill returned, leading the brown horse, the sorrel following apathetically a rod or so

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behind. Bill wondered what the two had talked about during his absence, but there was no human means of finding out; their mining venture, probably.

Joe and Lobo came down off the hill as Bill was turning the horses into the corral, holding the brown horse a minute longer for a gentle nose-rubbing and smoothing of the mane and forelock. Joe came up, wearing a look of reluctant interest.

"Well! Where did you dig up the horses?" she asked, leaning against the fence as if she were tired.

Bill told her, making the story as brief as possible. Back of his words was a deep curiosity concerning Joe's unexpected overtures, since she had not been speaking to him conversationally since Mary's death.

"And what are their names?"

"Hail and Farewell," said Bill, holding himself from smiling and coining the names impulsively. "They've flitted in and out of my life so airily that I hate to give them any permanent names that would anchor them in my mind. I did think of calling them Bird and Bat, but I guess I won't."

Joe shook back her blowing hair and picked at a loose piece of bark on a rail. She did not look at Bill, nor did she smile as he had hoped she would. He liked Joe's mirth, it was so deliciously young and wholesome, so different from the sophisticated young girls of his acquaintance — though he did not know many.

"Bill, I wish you'd tell me the truth about that — you know." Still she stared down at the piece of

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bark, and her voice was low, with the harshness of constraint.

"I did, Joe." Bill looked down at her studiously. "I hate all this as much as you do. It isn't because you don't believe me, though of course I hate that too. But ——"

"Well, go on. I can forgive almost anything, I guess, if you'll just come out and tell the truth. I'm in earnest about this, Bill. You think I'm just a kid and don't know anything much, but that's where you're fooled. I have thoughts that I don't tell any one. And about this one thing I am terribly in earnest. It's — important. I don't mean about Mary, either — but I know what the doctor said killed her. It's more important than that, Bill, and I tried to put you on your honor for a different reason than the one you think. It's *got* to stop. You don't know how much it means to — to all of us." She turned her face farther away from him, leaning her forehead against the rail.

Bill looked at her with a new thought in his mind. She was crying, he suspected, and Joe was not the sort to cry over trifling matters.

"Would it help any if I told you that I do know what it means?" He moved closer. "Listen, little Joe. I'm trying all I can to help keep trouble away from this little family. I'm mighty sorry the evidence is all against me, so far, but — I haven't broken that pledge, for one thing, and I don't even know what you found the other day when you took the dog out on

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Mary's track. You took it for granted I was guilty. Was that fair?"

Joe lifted her head and stared hard into his face, and Bill bore the inspection as best he could.

"If you're just bluffing you're good at it. What made you shave off your whiskers when you came here? Were you afraid some one would come here and recognize you? And you must remember I saw you just going to take a drink. Any dud would call those two suspicious circumstances. And sometimes you talk like a tramp and then you use good language whenever you forget yourself. And you can't tell *me* you learned your table manners in any hell's kitchen kind of a place. And there's a — a kind of a way you walk when you aren't thinking about yourself. You try awful hard, Bill, but you can't get away with this lower-element stuff. So why are you making such hard work of looking like the great unwashed, if you're all right and aren't up to something? And another thing, why has mother fallen for you the way she has? She's no softy."

Bill laughed in sheer relief at the nature of her charges.

"Oh, all right. But it wouldn't do you any harm to confide in me a little more. If you don't, you can't blame me for what I think of you. I'm sure I'd be tickled to death to think well of you if you ever gave me the chance." She pulled loose the bark and threw it viciously at the sorrel horse and got only a lift of one foot for her pains.

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"No mere Bill Woods would ever think of calling his horses Hail and Farewell," she told him shrewdly. "You're a fake, from your name all the way through. Why *shouldn't* I think you're up to some mean-ness?"

"Because," said Bill hotly, "if you're keen enough to see all these things, you *know* I'm no mucker."

Joe did not answer, except to shrug her shoulders.

"If you thought I was," Bill went on, "you wouldn't be here talking to me the way you are. You don't go around asking Hank to reveal his past, I'll bet."

"Hank's easy to tag. He never says things that don't fit in with his make-up. He couldn't. He wouldn't know how. And you don't know how not to. That's the difference. Anyway, we're getting away from the subject, which is — whisky." She shuddered. "If you knew how we hate the very name of it you'd never dream of bringing it here."

"I didn't bring any."

"But, Bill!" She turned on him, her young face pinched and old-looking. "Somebody's bringing it. I — I found ——"

"Yes?" He leaned to her eagerly.

"Haven't you heard your mother calling you, Josephine?" Marshall was so close to them that they started guiltily. "Bill, I think after all we need not get the horses from Nelson. Yours are evidently broken to carrying packs, and we can use them. I'll pay you for the use of them, of course, and Hank

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wants to start back early in the morning — or even to-night, if he could have his way. Anxious to get that ore out and see what it will bring. I don't blame him. I'm anxious about it myself."

He rambled on, his watery eyes flitting here and there nervously, just as his mind flitted from one subject to another. He talked self-pityingly of the hardships he had endured in trying to grub a living out of the desert, and of his hope that the Whistlerock claim would eventually free him from the drudgery. To Bill, who knew the truth behind this desert ranch, Marshall's talk was almost nauseating. He knew too well who had endured the hardships, and why, and for the moment he despised the man who could dare to whine over the sacrifice which others were making for his soul's sake. A pitifully useless sacrifice, it seemed to Woods. In his opinion the man was not worth the struggle they were making to save him.

Long into the night he lay and thought of the hopelessness of the fight, and of Joe's thinly covered knowledge of her father's lapse. The kid was fighting to keep her mother from finding it out; that was plain enough and pathetic enough to make any decent man's heart ache for both of them. The careful concealment of Joe matched by the anxious subterfuges of her mother. And between the two, Barby, enduring a hated exile from the things that filled her cup of happiness, hugging her own little hurt and never dreaming the tragic fight those others were making. And Charley Marshall going his devious, sodden way, whin-

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ing because the road to the devil was made so difficult!

Another thing that nagged at Bill was the necessity of going off to the mine without hearing just what it was that Joe had found — she and her dog with the precocious eyes and nose.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

STILL THE BOOTLEGGING GOES ON

BILL sat by a campfire under the pines and watched the licking flames weaving intricate dance measures while the thin blue columns of smoke reached up toward the lower branches. The pungent scent of pine needles scorching, the soft sparkle of the near stars, the ruddily tinted face of old Hank across the fire; the tales he told of booming Goldfield, Pioche, Virginia City; the remoteness, the silence, drugged his everyday thoughts and woke, as it had done long ago and would always have power to do, the lightly sleeping adventurer who would dare much and reck little of the fruits of his daring. It was for this that he had left the convention-ruled life of the towns and his eyes glowed in the flickering light of the flames.

A branch broke with a loud snapping behind him and he whirled, half expecting to see some heroic figure of the past come swaggering out of the night. Hank gathered his whiskers safe into one hand and spat into the glowing fringe of coals. He gave a cackling laugh and threw on a dead branch, watching the spouting geyser of tiny stars shoot straight up into the smoke.

"Coyote prowlin' around," he commented, and picked up a rock and shied it toward the spot. "Well, as I was tellin' yuh, ole Jim Flannigan, he come faunchin' down past my camp that day, an' he say t'

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me, 'Hank,' he says, 'I'll be dogged if I'm a-goin' t' stand ——' ”

His voice was a meaningless drone in Bill's ears. The mood for building visions from Hank's garrulous monologue was past. That had not sounded like a coyote out there in the dark, nor any other nocturnal animal. Bill would have sworn that a man was skulking somewhere near. He even fancied that he had caught the sound of a smothered exclamation immediately after the breaking of that stick. He listened, eyes upon the fire, ears strained to catch another sound; heard the faint, unmistakable scuffling of cautious footsteps. He glanced from under his hatbrim at Hank, and saw his eyes turn involuntarily toward the spot without breaking by the slightest pause the thread of his story.

“Somebody camped near here, Hank?”

“Hunh? *Camped* near here? Naw, shore they ain't. What'd anybody want to camp up in here fer?”

“That's what I wanted to know. Any trail through here?”

“Naw. No way fer a trail this fur over. Whistlerock cliff, right back here, is straight up 'n' down fer ten mile er sech a matter. That's what makes it s' darn hard t' git in an' out with ore an' supplies. Why?” Hank leaned forward, peering through the smoke at Bill.

“Nothing, only I'll bet your coyote's a man. I was wondering why he doesn't come up and show himself. Must be lost, if this is away off the trail.”

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Hank tilted his head back and laughed a shrill cackle.

"That ain't no man," he cried. "Dogged if you don't ack skittish as a cat, up here. Mebby we better mog into the shack an' crawl into the blankets, Bill. Settin' out by a campfire don't amuse me none, anyway. I had my fill uh campin' out, you bet. Forty year of it ——"

"Who would be likely to come away off up here at night, Hank? Couldn't be Marshall, I suppose. He'd come into camp."

"Bill, I'll be dogged if yuh ain't lettin' yer imagination run away with yuh! Ain't nobuddy within six, seven mile uh here. Me, I'm goin' t' crawl in. You better come along too. We oughta git up early."

"I'll finish my pipe here, Hank. Be along in a minute."

Hank got up stiffly, stood for a minute looking down at Bill and went off, muttering to himself. Bill thought he heard the footsteps retreating to a point beyond the cabin, but he could not be certain of that because Hank was making a good deal of racket and cursing at the darkness. Bill laid another stick on the fire and sat there, smoking and staring into the flames, the picture of a dreamer of dreams.

There *was* a man walking somewhere behind the cabin. Hank was muttering inside, getting ready for bed in the dark; a shiftless proceeding, since there were plenty of candles. Down in a grassy hollow near by a horse snorted at some small hunter of the night. A

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cedar bird cheeped up in a bushy pine. A whisper of breeze stirred the branches over Bill's head and swayed the leaping flames.

When it grew still again the footsteps had ceased and only Hank's mumbling broke the stillness of the high places where, a long rifle-shot away, the Whistlerock cliff rose like a wall behind them. This was to the east. South of the camp a small, grassy basin made grazing for the horses for a time. West, the hills tilted crazily downward to the Marshall ranch and the desert beyond, a network of narrow ridges and deep canyons wrinkling up to where they were drawn together and cut off sharply by Whistlerock cliff. North somewhere across the ridges lay the trail which Bill had lost. An isolated spot, truly; a camp where the chance passer-by was an impossible incident.

Yielding to a sudden impulse to test his impression, Bill got up and walked away toward the horses, making no attempt at silence. When he had gone beyond the fire glow and was hidden in the black shadow of the rocks and trees, he slipped off his boots and circled, treading softly and stopping often to listen. The change of posture brought twinges from his ankle, but he persisted until he had stolen close to the corner of the cabin farthest from the fire. A small window, open for ventilation, was cut into the wall near the head of Hank's bunk, and beside that window stood a vague blot that moved. The mumble of Hank's voice was more distinctly audible now, though Bill could not distinguish a word of what he was saying.

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He could not very well get closer without showing himself or making some little sound, so he retraced his steps as carefully as he had come, until he reached the point where he had left his boots. He knew the place even in the dark, for a huge boulder bulked against the starlight at the edge of the basin. He walked unconcernedly back to the fire, kicked the charred embers together and stood for a moment watching the new blaze. He was smiling to himself.

"Oh, Hank! Do you want the fire put out? Think I'll turn in," he called finally, turning his head toward the cabin.

"Yeah — put 'er out," Hank growled sleepily.

When Bill entered, a few minutes later, Hank was on the edge of snoring and turned over with a grunt as if he disliked being disturbed. Bill mounted to the pole bunk just under the roof and was asleep before he had even begun to study the odd occurrence.

Whatever Hank had to talk about with his surreptitious caller did not appear in his conversation at breakfast time. His white beard flowed grandly down over his soiled shirt front and his eyes were mild and innocent as a child's questioning gaze. He talked of mining from the prospector's viewpoint and bewailed the fact that he had not been able to run across high-grade ore in their claims, which were still farther back in the hills and harder to get at than was the Whistlerock. He would take Bill up there some day, he said. Now that Bill was over here he ought to know exactly how things stood. He showed Bill the Whistlerock

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incline shaft but Bill did not care about going down, since they had work ahead of them.

The sacked ore stood on the dump ready to be loaded on the horses, and there seemed to be nothing to do save pack the horses and go. For the life of him Bill could not find anything to pin a suspicion to, save the fact that Hank had talked with some man secretly through the window of the shack; a sly performance, but nothing criminal. Still, the small mystery nagged at Bill just as the disappearing iodine had done. It irritated him to waste good brain power over a puzzle that promised nothing big or vital when it was solved; a petty thief caught in the act and wounded a bit and given first aid from Bill's borrowed medicine; a man calling on Hank and taking some pains to keep his visit a secret from Bill. Neither incident pointed to the source of Marshall's supply of moonshine, so far as Bill could discover, and it was that matter which he had set out to clear up for Mrs. Marshall.

He helped pack the two horses and started out with Hail, the brown horse, leaving Hank to follow with Farewell. The trail was steep and crooked, following a canyon that did not seem to know which way it was heading, but ran mostly to sharp turns, with occasional knobby ridges which must be crossed to save mileage. It seemed to Bill a terribly roundabout trail to the ranch, but Hank told him it was the only practicable route on account of bad shale slides and ledges.

Sometimes they stopped to roll rocks out of the trail, so that it was midafternoon when they arrived

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at the ranch; and Bill, at least, was tired out. The trip had been hard on his weak ankle but he did not mention that phase of it to any one.

He found that the family ate in the kitchen to save steps for the volunteer cooks, which meant that any idea of segregating the hired men had been abandoned for the time being. Bill had ample opportunity therefore of studying Barby and Joe when they were not assuming a certain mood for his benefit. The study promised to be interesting, for Barby seemed to have dropped her dissatisfied bearing and was humanly approachable. Also, Bill observed that she still wore the diamond ring.

Joe had very little to say, which probably helped to preserve the peace, since her eyes were stormy. Marshall drank cup after cup of strong black coffee and was vaguely apologetic in his manner toward his wife, who looked harassed and as if she had spent more than one sleepless night just lately. Her eyes met Bill's with a certain anxious meaning, and immediately after the meal was over she announced that the girls could stack the dishes and let them wait until it was cooler, if they liked, for she was going to show Bill how she wanted her new canna bed fixed.

"But Bill must help pack down the rest of that ore, Henrietta," Marshall objected weakly, looking from her to Bill with a gleam of suspicion in his eyes.

"I know, Charles. But he won't be packing ore all summer," she retorted more sharply than was her habit. "I've got the thing on my mind now, and I may as

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well tell him what I want so I can forget about it. Come on, Bill, and let me show you what I want done.

"Now," she said, pointing to a rocky bit of level ground at the farther end of the pond, where Bill had obediently followed her, "tell me what you have found out up there. Have you learned anything from Hank about where Charles gets whisky?"

"Not a thing. It's a straight mining proposition up there, Mrs. Marshall, and there is no trail going through so that the stuff can be brought to Hank from farther back in the hills. Is he still getting it?"

"Is he getting it!" Mrs. Marshall wailed. "He's tippling, now. There haven't been any performances like the one just after you came, which is a blessing, for I don't believe the girls have noticed anything strange about him. But he's drinking steadily since we went to Goldfield. Perhaps he got hold of something there — I searched the car, though. Bill, I feel sometimes as if I should go mad! At first I could get him interested in the ranch, but now he hates the desert and wants me to go back — and I *can't* go back. There's Joe to think of, and besides, we've invested so heavily here that we've got to make good now. Our money's tied up — and here we are."

"You've got a great place here," Bill soothed. "You seem to have beaten the desert, for once. A swan and goldfish are an awful wallop to hand her, I'd say."

"Oh, yes." Mrs. Marshall smiled briefly. "We did do that just for a joke on the desert, Bill. It's so

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— so incongruous that we sort of hoped the desert would see that we had scored one. But what's the use? We can stay and keep things growing, and think we've won, and made a garden spot where nothing ever grew before. And then we die — and the desert just lies out there and smiles to herself. And when we're gone, she begins to creep up and nibble at our grain fields and alfalfa until they are gone. And our ditches fill with sand, and the trees die, and the grass and the flowers. And then she'll suck this pond dry — it may take her a hundred years to wipe out our last track, Bill, but then — what's a hundred years to the desert? She'll lie out there and smile when it's all over, exactly the same as she's smiling to-day, and the same as she smiled a hundred years ago and a thousand and ten thousand. You can't make it what it is not, Bill. Desert it was in the beginning — barren sand covered with water, and then barren sand baking in the sun. You can coax it to grow anything you like, almost, but turn your back on it and it begins to slip back and be desert again.

“And that's the way I feel lately about Charles,” she said dispiritedly. “A man is what he is within his own soul. You can lead him and watch him and guard him — but you can't change that inner fiber that makes him what he is. He must change that himself. I suppose that is what life is for, and we only hinder when we try to bear all the burdens ourselves. I can do everything that is humanly possible to shield Charles from temptation, but I can't reform him.”

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"You give up, do you?" Bill's tone was faintly incredulous. He had not believed this sturdy, patient soul would ever weaken.

"No." She lifted her face and looked at him straight. "I never give up. Not in the way you mean. I shall try to keep Charles from drinking, and that is all. I know better now than to try to reform him, however. There's a difference. I shall protect Joe from the sight of a drunken father, and to do that I must find out where he gets whisky — or whatever it is he drinks — and prevent him from getting any more." She heaved a great sigh. "It won't be easy, I'm afraid."

"I'm stumped, so far," Bill confessed. "I did think it was Hank, but the old duffer isn't keen enough to put over anything without giving some sign a fellow could read." He paused, swiftly debating the wisdom of telling her what he had seen and heard the night before. But she had enough to worry about without adding meaningless mysteries. "I kept an eye on Hank," he went on after a moment. "I'm positive he didn't bring anything off the hill except ore. I helped pack the horses and watched every move Hank made. And if there's a drop of liquor at the mine I failed to find it. There wasn't a sign of any odor of it, either. So Hank is absolved, to date, Mrs. Marshall. I'll have a couple more trips up there, and I mean to watch him. Is there anything more that I can do?"

"No-o, unless you can find this last supply and

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smash it just as Joe did the bottle Mary had helped herself from. Poor Joe! Think of having a child like her running across a thing of that sort." She bit her lip, then smiled wryly. "I turned out my prize hens, Bill, so that I'd have an excuse to hunt around for stolen nests. But I haven't found what I was really looking for. And I have gone over the house from top to bottom with as little result. And Charles," she added grimly, "goes right on drinking a little all the while. I know it. But what can I do?"

"Stop worrying, for one thing," Bill advised her. "Unless I'm mistaken, Joe's enough like her mother to face the situation if she has to, and hate it chiefly on your account. Why don't you take her into your confidence, Mrs. Marshall? She'd soon locate the booze, with that dog of hers."

"That's exactly what I'm afraid of," Mrs. Marshall said nervously. "Whenever I see her take that dog on the leash and start off trailing I want to call her back. She was too young to understand just why we moved out here in the wilderness — and now she's at the age where it would be a heart-breaking affair for her to discover that her father is a drunkard. I'm used to it, but Joe is given to hero worship, and her daddy is her hero. The disillusionment would be terrible. It will come, unless we can stop this daily tipping. I know Charles so well!" Her voice was tired and very bitter.

Again Bill was tempted to tell her how much she was mistaken in Joe. But that would shatter her illu-

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sion that Joe was still her baby girl who knew nothing at all of the problems of life, and Bill found himself reassuring her with smooth generalities instead. He left her feeling more hopeful and carried away with him a heavier weight of responsibility and the uneasy memory of having promised to reform her husband for her — he who had never attempted to reform anything more depraved than a hackneyed plot. At the steps he glanced back and saw her standing very still and staring out at the desert that would beat her some day into the dust and take back to its barren breast this work of her hands and her heart.

Bill looked beyond, to the desert and the far mountains flushed under the crimson and pale rose of sunset, and mentally attested that hasty promise. Behind that proud, fighting mother he visioned the proud, fighting daughter and that other proud girl, valiantly carrying on in the leering face of defeat; while out there the desert waited unmoved to see how well they would fight. Well, he would fight with them — and somehow they would win.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JOE TAKES A HAND

IN his stories Woods Morgan rather made a point of keeping the action moving swiftly along to the climax, and the dramatic interest keyed to the highest pitch of suspense. He had learned during his apprentice days that editors will not tolerate dragging intervals where the reader's interest is supposed to flag, and he had come to a critical attitude toward destiny itself and to feel that nature ought to skip more of the brooding growth of events. Woods Morgan would like to run a clean sheet of paper into the machine of the gods and start a fresh chapter, skipping the next month of apparent inaction. As it was, Bill Woods was forced to plod through many dull days when he wondered what it was all about and why he was sweating with the toil of his hands under a desert sun when he might be sitting somewhere in the shade, doing all this strenuous stuff on his portable typewriter; only, he could not find that darned typewriter.

Bill resented vaguely the cackling content of old Hank, who dug high-grade ore out of the Whistlerock mine while Bill packed it down to the ranch on Hail and Farewell, four sacks to a trip and two round trips a week. At first the novelty of it and his suspicion of Hank gave those trips the glow of adventure. After the second trip alone down the mountain, it became

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nothing more nor less than straight hard work, though he did enjoy the time spent at the ranch.

What irked Bill most was the fact that no one seemed to be getting anywhere. It was pretty certain that Marshall was getting his daily nips, as Hank called them, but neither his wife nor Bill could find where he kept his liquor. They thought he must find some means of getting hold of whisky when he hauled the ore to the mine that had agreed to ship it with theirs, but they had no proof of anything and so were constrained to keep their suspicions to themselves. And that is always an unsatisfactory state of affairs, as every one knows.

The girls furnished some diversion, though Barby spent most of her time in the house or on the porch overlooking the pond where the black swan sailed languidly round and round and the goldfish waved plumed tails within their screened cage. Bill saw Barby just often enough to be tantalizing. Joe he was always seeing without much satisfaction. Joe puzzled him whenever he thought about her. She was always hiking off somewhere with the rangy young Lobo at her heels, and she seemed to carry the proverbial chip on her shoulder.

Up at the mine, on the nights when he stayed there with Hank, conditions were nearer to what he had planned for the summer. He would sit in the broody silence of those high solitudes and smoke and listen to old Hank — but here too there was a false note that he would surely have whipped into harmony some-

Joe Takes a Hand

how in a story. Hank was just the same as he had been two years ago, with a difference that irritated Bill the more because he could not explain it. It seemed to him that he saw a leer in Hank's eyes when they were caught off guard. There was nothing hidden, nothing Bill could discover that was not honest mining. Hank worked hard at the Whistlerock, and the dump outside the incline shaft proved it. He talked freely of his work, and sometimes he sorted and sacked the ore while Bill looked on and asked questions, and even tried to teach Bill how to distinguish between the rock that carried high values and that which did not pay for the hauling. A straight, honest attempt to make a little clean money.

And yet, there was the leer in Hank's eyes, the veiled contempt in his high-pitched cackle. It rasped Bill. He felt all the while as if Hank were putting something over on him. There was that matter of the secret talk through the window with a strange visitor — Bill had never found out who the fellow was, where he came from or what he had to talk about that was worth all the bother of a clandestine interview. He had long ago decided that it must have been some one hiding out in the hills away from the law, some one whom Hank was shielding. That being the case, Bill would not pry into the affair, though it hurt him a little that Hank would not trust him with the secret. He had helped a friend or two himself before now, and he could understand. But granting that was the explanation, there was no reason why Hank should

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look at him the way he did sometimes. Bill did **not** like it, and some day he meant to tell Hank so.

One blistering day when Bill came down off the mountain with four sacks of ore and the heel gone off one boot, Mrs. Marshall manœuvered adroitly for a brief conference when there were no listeners.

"I wish, Bill, you could manage to go along with Charles and see where he gets his whisky," she began in her abrupt way. "I think we'll have to get at the source of supply and stop him that way. Can't you think of some excuse?"

"I don't have to. I need new boots." Bill lifted the foot that had no heel and showed her the damage. "I've about decided to resign from this packer's job, anyway. There's nothing up on the mountain, that I can discover. Old Hank's burrowing into the hill after this ore — that much I know for a fact. I've seen him at work. He couldn't be doing any moonshining on the side, or I'd catch him at it. So I'm wasting my time up there."

"Maybe, if you could offer to drive the truck — It's the first time since we came out here that Charles has stuck to any job that even looked like work," she said with a baffled resentment. "He never has unbent his dignity before to drive anything but the touring car. Work has been beneath him. That's why I'm suspicious of this ore-hauling. I wish you'd see what you can do about it."

"I saw," Bill made dry answer. "He looked as if I wanted to steal the truck right out from under him

Joe Takes a Hand

when I remarked that I drove a supply truck in the war. He reached out and clung white-knuckled to the wheel and said he'd drive the truck himself."

Mrs. Marshall's fine, dark eyebrows drew together. She looked, Bill thought, exactly as she would look if she were presiding over some meeting and meant to call the jangling confusion to order. It was pitiful that so sordid a problem as her husband's inebriety must fill her mind.

"Well," she sighed at last, "I shall have to leave it to you to think of some excuse for going along. Of course, if you do go, Charles won't get any liquor, but at least you can see where he would be most likely to get it, which will be something gained."

"I'll try to gain more than that," was Bill's optimistic rejoinder.

He did try. Marshall was behind the wheel and the engine was running when Bill appeared unexpectedly and climbed into the front seat as if he belonged there.

Marshall gave a start, then glared at his passenger with a venom surprising in so mild-mannered a gentleman.

"What's the meaning of this?" he challenged sharply.

"Oh, I just thought I'd ride in with you, Mr. Marshall. Want to get a few things." Bill had settled himself to his liking and was calmly loading his pipe with the idea of getting it nicely going before the car picked up speed.

"Get out. You aren't hired to ride around."

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"Well, I've quit, then. I'll ride to town with you, if you don't mind." Bill thrust the pipe between his teeth and struck a match, holding it cupped between his palms until the blaze strengthened.

An insane light flared in Marshall's eyes; the light of a terror that fights blindly what it most fears. He half turned and struck Bill a terrific blow under the ear, then heaved him overboard.

Bill landed on the other ear in deep sand beside the road and lay huddled there for a minute, half stunned. When he crawled to his knees the truck was gone, rattling down the narrow trail that hugged the base of the mountain. He sat back on his haunches and stared dazedly after the car, saw his pipe lying on the ground and reached for it mechanically.

"Aunt Jemima, that was a darb!" Joe's voice exclaimed awesomely beside him. "I never dreamed dad packed a wallop like that."

Bill turned his head slowly and looked up at her, then settled himself Turk fashion on the ground. The sun was down and it was cool there and comfortable as any other place. He began once more methodically filling his pipe.

"I'm a fool for always wanting to know why," he said slowly, his eyes turning toward the low-hanging dust cloud that rose behind the vanishing truck.

"I wouldn't mind knowing, myself," said Joe. "You must have displeased dad."

"Do you think that's it?" Bill finished lighting his pipe, then got slowly to his feet and stood looking

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speculatively at the slim little figure in the blue bib overalls. "I wonder if your mother would mind my borrowing the car," he said at last. "I'm such a persistent cuss I've got to finish what I started out to do."

"If it's following dad, you'd better hurry up," Joe told him pithily, "because I'm going along. Get in. I'll drive."

She was in the car, sliding down behind the wheel before Bill could stop her. He had a feeling that Joe would be much better off at home, but from the way she had planted herself in the driver's seat he judged that getting her out would be much like pulling a cat out of a bag backwards. Her toe was on the starter, her hand was on the shift lever and her eyes were fixed inquiringly upon him.

"Don't hold up the parade, old thing," she cried sharply. "I'm going to overhaul dad and find out why he handed you that punch in the ear when you weren't looking. I didn't raise my parents to act like rotters, and that wasn't a sporting thing to do, if he is my favorite father. Let Lobo in the back. He loves to ride."

Bill opened the tonneau door and the big pup scrambled in. He looked at Joe again, shook his head at the temptation to try and persuade her to stay at home, and stepped in beside her.

"Your mother will worry about you, kid," he hinted, as they left the garage.

For answer Joe honked three times, craned her neck toward the house, swung out her left arm and pointed

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toward the sunset glow down the road and swung into the narrow trail.

"She saw us and she knows we're going somewhere, so it's all right," she observed serenely and settled against the cushions, her bobbed head jerking to the sway of the car over bumps.

"At least, she'll probably suspect something of the sort," Bill retorted as they bounced out of a chuck.

"Mom's a good sort," Joe commented, peering ahead at the dust of the hurrying truck. "It's simply marvellous the way she understands things. That's one reason why I want to settle this thing with dad away from the ranch. I'd rather not have mother know about it."

Bill made no reply to that. He was wondering how he could discover anything worth while with Joe along. Her mother would never forgive him if he let Joe into his plans or told her what he was after. He felt bound to keep faith with Mrs. Marshall and he was resolved that if Joe learned the truth it should not be from him. He wondered just how much she already knew, but he could think of no plausible way of finding out, so he sat and smoked and said nothing.

Once they rounded the huge bulk of the mountain range and struck the long, straight road that bored across the flat desert valley to the north, they could see the swift-rising cloud before them that told of the speeding truck. Marshall was driving as fast as the machine was geared to travel, and Joe's mouth hardened as she pressed down on the accelerator and drove

Joe Takes a Hand

the car ahead much faster than a mechanic would approve over that road. The dusk was rapidly deepening and the evening star shone like white gold over distant peak on their left. Mars appeared suddenly in the darkening sky behind them. The young moon rested one sharp horn on a high ridge before it slid down after the sun. Joe leaned and switched on the headlights which immediately turned the drab streak of road to a warm khaki.

"Your dad'll see the lights, if he looks back," Bill remarked. "He'll know who it is on his trail — we haven't passed any road yet that turns into this one."

"Well, I can't help that," said Joe. "He's acting like a dumb-bell, anyway, driving like that with a load. He's trying to ditch us, looks like. He simply doesn't realize who has the wheel, back here, or he wouldn't try that stunt."

"Maybe we'd better not crowd him too far, to-night."

Joe turned her head and stared at him for a few seconds at the risk of breaking a spring.

"You're not so dumb as you try to make out, Bill," she told him bluntly. "There's something funny about dad, to-night. I think he needs a chaperon, if you ask me." She pressed her lips together. "If you haven't seen what's going on, you're blind in both eyes. I'm going to tell you something — but if you say one word to mother, I shall think up some way of killing you without getting caught at it. I mean it!"

"Go as far as you like, kid. I promise not to re-

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peat a word of it." Bill's voice carried the essence of truth. "I only want to help."

"That's the only reason why I'd tell you, Bill. I've been watching you and I've about decided that you're innocent; at least in this particular case. Well, it's about dad. He's a — a dipsomaniac, Bill."

"I see." Bill's voice soothed and comforted.

"Well, and that's why it's so important that no whisky comes on the ranch. Dad simply can't resist temptation, and I know he's been getting it somewhere. I'm so afraid mother will find out about him — she had him cured once, you know. It would simply kill her to know he's drinking again. He — he was not himself to-night, or he wouldn't have struck you the way he did. And the way he's driving and all — well, I think he needs somebody to look after him."

"I'll tell you now that was one reason why I wanted to go along with him," Bill confessed guardedly. "Since you know about your dad there's no harm in saying I had an idea I could maybe find out where he gets it. He must have caught on to me. He wasn't stewed to-night, Joe; not enough to upset his judgment. He didn't want me nosing along — which proves that he expects to get a fresh supply, I think."

"Well, he won't get past expecting," Joe muttered viciously. "I'll stick to him like a burr. Watch him drive, would you! I'll bet he knows we're after him."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FLAT TIRES DO NOT MAKE DULL BRAINS

THE sturdy four-cylinder car roared along the sandy trail, the headlights flicking bushes and rocks with brief radiance as they approached. Like many another youngster Joe drove fearlessly and with a reckless speed that simply ignored the possibility of accident. The fleeing truck was lost now in the darkness, its tail light out of commission and never repaired, as is the case with nine out of ten desert cars. The road was too straight to give a glimpse of the headlights through the dust, and it was by that dust cloud only that they knew they were slowly gaining. At first the dust had been barely perceptible, but now it showed plainly in the light beams.

Bill glanced often at Joe, thinking how relentlessly young she was and therefore how implacable in this remarkable chase. Her bobbed hair stood straight back from her forehead in a wavy mass from which a daring tendril whipped out, reaching for her parted lips. When it touched her Joe would give her head an impatient shake, never taking her eyes from the road.

A bald patch of barren soil, scored with ruts and small detours, showed ahead with the main trail drawn straight across; a miniature dry lake lying out away from its parent lake half a mile away. Joe sent a quick, triumphant glance Bill's way.

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"This lake bed's a marker. Ten miles exactly from the ranch. Made it in sixteen minutes. I'll bet you dad's not getting that speed out of his Lizzie."

"Good driving. We'll overhaul him in another mile."

"Sure. We ——"

Her voice trailed and ended in a gasp, her mouth still open. The car bucked, swerved sharply from the road as if the two sharp reports had scared it. Joe's legs straightened, feet on clutch and brake pedals. She looked at Bill with tragic eyes.

"Wouldn't that jar your false plate?" she wailed. "Oh, *darn* the rotten luck! Bill, *swear!*"

"Hellity damn," said Bill gravely.

Joe sucked in her breath.

"Did you hear it twice?" she asked apprehensively. "Or was it just an echo? Two blow-outs would be the giraffe's gargle, wouldn't it?"

"Something like that," Bill agreed with twitching lips and a queer glint in his eyes as he climbed out. He walked straight away from the car and Joe leaned out and watched him bewilderedly.

"You don't think you can catch him *afoot*, do you?" she called after him. "You'll have to help me fix these dumb tires." She stared and then yanked open the car door. "Well, if you aren't the bee's sleeping powder! What are you looking for — the air out of that front tire?"

Bill was walking bent nearly double beside the road, a lighted match in his fingers. The small flame out-

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lined his thin face with a Rembrandt glow. Joe came over and stood looking down at him curiously. In the rear seat of the car Lobo gave a faint, wistful whine.

"Here's what did the damage," Bill said abruptly, picking up something from the hard-packed rut. "I used something of the sort in a stor — I've heard of such things," he corrected himself hastily, holding up a small object for her to see. The match went out and he scratched another alight with his thumbnail, holding it down so that the flame lighted the rut for a few feet. "You get the idea, don't you, kid?"

"Big-headed roofing nails!" Joe stooped beside him, staring wide-eyed at the ground. "There's a lot in the back of the garage, in a keg. Well, the elephant's roller skates have been handed to us, Bill." She stood up straight and gazed up the road toward the truck which was now out of sight and hearing. "What a rotten trick to play for a bottle of booze!" Then she shook back her hair and looked at Bill in the starlight. "They must have just — spilled," she said lamely. "Dad wouldn't do a mean trick like that. He — he has to pay for new tires, you see."

Bill returned to the car, examining the tires by the light of more matches. Front and rear on the left side were squashed flat to the ground and he doubted his ability to mend tubes in the dark, even granting they were not past patching. One spare tire was strapped to the rack behind, and Joe thought there was a spare tube under the rear seat. Bill set a small bush

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afire and left Joe to keep it going while he jacked up the car and went to work.

"Parents are a great responsibility," Joe sighed with brave flippancy, when Bill was pulling the torn tube out of the front casing and running investigative finger tips along inside for nails — and finding several embedded in the tough rubber. "I don't know what to do with dad, really. Does it look to you, Bill, as if he had deliberately planned to protect himself this way from pursuit?"

"Sort of," Bill assented, holding up the worthless inner tube for inspection before he cast it contemptuously into the bonfire. "We go in on one rim, kid. You were mistaken about that extra tube under the seat."

"Then it's on the shelf in the garage. I know we've got one."

"That's just fine. Only, we go in on one rim just the same."

"I just know those stubby nails came out of our keg. They've been standing there for ages, because dad got millions too many to put the roof on the garage and bunk house. He didn't know how many to get, so he just blandly ordered a keg, when he didn't need more than a quart." Joe's mind could not leave the disaster.

"Still, he found a use for them," drawled Bill.

"Dad never did it. It isn't my dad — it's the devil that lives in the bottle," she defended with pathetic earnestness.

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"Surest thing in the world. We've got to fight that devil — to help your dad."

"Yes. It was the drink devil that put him up to this, wasn't it, Bill?"

Bill nodded, busy with the tire.

"And the horrible part is trying to keep mom from finding out. She's had a bad time of it with dad, and the old dear thinks I don't know. She's been a saint about it, Bill. Now it's my turn to straighten dad out, and I don't want her in on it at all."

"Does Barbby know?" Bill had often wondered about that.

"Sure, she does. Barb herds mother while I keep an eye on dad and try to find his cache. That's why Barb sticks to the house all the while — to be with mom and see that she doesn't get wise to dad. But Barb doesn't know about you, that time," she added a bit shyly. "I was just kidding when I said I'd told Barb. She's so disgusted with dad that she would rave if she knew we had two on our hands to watch."

"Isn't it about time you took me off your blacklist and put me on roll call?" Bill glanced up at her, grinning. "I'm a darn disappointing outlaw, Joe, but I'm a whale of a pal if I'm given half a chance."

Joe smiled faintly down at him, her face indistinct in the shadow since her back was turned to the fire.

"I might do that, if you ever came clean," she said. "My pals have to be one hundred percent. I don't have very many and I hate to find out afterwards I've been stung." She turned and left him, foraging for

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more brush which was scanty on that sterile lake bottom.

Bill went on with his work, wishing that he knew for certain just how much lies in a name. If she knew that he was really a hired man in name only and that others had seemed proud to call him friend, would she hold him so long on her probation list? He could tell her, of course, and find out in two minutes how much Joe cared for name and station. But then he wanted to be trusted for himself, just as he appeared to her. Woods Morgan had always secretly prided himself on his personality, liked to think it was that which made friends for him. Surely that same personality ought to win friends for plain Bill Woods.

"Lobo showed me tracks beside the road where the nails are scattered," Joe announced behind him, as Bill was letting down the jack. "They look like dad's, all right, and Lobo thinks so too. So dad must have stopped the truck while he got out and doped the road for us. If you'll let me have some matches I can make sure."

Bill put the jack in the car and went with her, the dog slouching along in the lead. It was an absurdly simple bit of trailing. They followed the footprints to where they plainly indicated that the owner of the feet had left a car and returned to it at that point. The short nails with the large heads were sprinkled in the rut for a distance of nearly a hundred feet. No car could pass over that trap without picking up several of them, and punctures were a foregone conclusion.

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"It just shows you," said Joe, "what the drink devil will put a man up to. I suppose we'll have to turn around and go limping back home."

"I suppose so. Unless you know where your dad takes the ore. We might trail along, if it isn't too far. Take him by surprise, maybe."

"But I don't know. Dad's always kind of ducked when any one spoke of it. And up here five miles or so farther there are cross-roads. Dad could take his choice of four different roads. We could tell by his tracks, but he'd give us another dose of roofing nails, maybe." She started for the car, walking reluctantly. "I'm no quitter, Bill Woods — but I hate to be a fool twice in the same place."

Bill did not ask her if he might drive. He climbed in behind the wheel and Joe sat beside him without protest. But when he had turned the car toward home she remarked that she always despised driving when she had to crawl along.

"Thought so. Now, kid, how's this for a scheme? We'll go home and put the car away and put on the front tire and say nothing about it. And when your dad comes we'll still act innocent, and see if we can't watch where he caches the hooch. Because he'll undoubtedly have some along. He wouldn't have taken all this trouble to head us off, otherwise."

"If he doesn't cache it before he gets home," Joe surmised in a discouraged tone. "I'll tell you what we can do. I'll swipe the field glasses, and you climb up the hill somewhere above the road where you can

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keep watch, and if he stops anywhere within half a mile or so of the house, and ditches anything, you can spot the place. It won't be any farther off than that, for dad simply hates to exert himself. It'll be the crocodile's shopping list if we can detect him at long distance."

They worked that plan out in minute detail on the slow drive home, and Bill agreed with the girl that they couldn't possibly fail. For Bill meant to establish himself immediately, before Marshall could possibly return, and watch from then on. He would choose some point—Joe declared that she knew a marvellous bunch of boulders where he could see for half a mile in either direction—and make sure that the truck could not halt within walking distance of home and he remain in ignorance.

Mrs. Marshall had evidently been listening for them, for she met them at the garage with a mild reproof all ready for Joe. Bill forestalled that, however, by taking the blame himself.

"I spoke of borrowing the car this evening," he said, "and Joe and the dog immediately hopped in and treated me to a ride. I hope you don't mind, Mrs. Marshall. We had a blow-out—and the extra tube was here, so we're pretty late, I know. I'm sorry."

"Joe knows I don't like to have her go away from the ranch without letting me know," Mrs. Marshall said perfunctorily, and Bill knew that her mind was on his mission. Presently Joe, running off to get the field glasses while her mother wasn't looking, made

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the opportunity Mrs. Marshall wanted and Bill dreaded. There was no help for it—both Joe and her mother had trusted him. He must do the best he could.

“It’s a fact, Mrs. Marshall,” he said, before she could question him. “The minute Joe knew I wanted to take the car, she jumped in and said she’d drive. Mr. Marshall refused to let me go with him,” he added suavely, remembering her plan.

“Yes. I saw how he struck you and knocked you out of the car. Joe must have seen it too. What did the child say?”

“She said she didn’t know her dad packed such a wallop. And later she observed that it wasn’t a sporting thing to do, and I must have displeased him terribly.”

“Oh. I wondered if she could possibly—but, of course, she wouldn’t dream why he did it. Well, we must try something else.”

“Watch him when he comes back is my next try. I may be able to see where he hides it. I think he’ll bring something back with him, or he wouldn’t have objected to my going. Don’t you worry, Mrs. Marshall. I’ll find a way to head him off.”

She put out a firm, white hand and laid it on his arm.

“My friend, it seems too much to ask of you,” she said quietly. “It isn’t even as if it were a big, dramatic fight I’ve dragged you into. It’s so sordid and mean—spying on a poor, weak old man who

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persists in degrading himself and his family with liquor. You can't even get story stuff out of it, Woods! And you might be off having real adventures ——"

"*Quien sabe?*" Woods retorted lightly. "You never know where adventure stalks her quarry. Tonight I shall lie out on the side of the hill, and look at the stars, and maybe my happy genius will visit me. Who knows?"

"I know it's very good of you to try and lift this horrible business above the muck. I try, but somehow I seem to have lost the knack of hoping. When I saw Charles strike you — *you*, a man he should be proud to know — I felt as if I never wanted to see him again. And yet I know I shall go on fighting to save him from himself. Well, forgive this maudlin mood of mine. I don't often whimper, but there's a sympathetic quality in your voice that tempts me to weep and wail. Here comes Joe. I thought the child had gone to bed. Well, I hope your vigil brings some results, Bill."

"You trot along to bed, old dear," Joe advised her mother cheerfully. "I'm going to help Bill put the tire on this wheel, and then I'll come. It's a penance. Like a dumb-bell I drove off without any tubes in the car, so now I'll hold the light for Bill."

She might have wondered why her mother yielded so readily, but youth takes a great deal for granted, and Joe was thinking how she meant to curl up in the car and watch for the return of the truck.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BILL TRIES SLEUTHING

THE eastern sky was streaked with bars of orange and various shades of red when the truck came muttering in from the desert, passing Bill's hideout at a good fifteen miles an hour — fast enough for that chunky road. Bill got his field glasses focussed on the car and watched it to the corner of the corral. Marshall sat listlessly driving, as a man would after a night on the trail, and the truck itself was empty. Bill could look down into the body of it and he saw nothing at all save a jack that bounced sluggishly when the wheels hit a rock. On the running board nearest him a canteen set was clamped. On the opposite side he saw the five-gallon reserve canteen of gasoline in its rack that clamped on. Unless he carried it in his coat or under the seat, there was no liquor aboard — and beneath the seat was the gas tank, with little room for anything besides.

Bill left the rock pile and slipped along toward the stable. He was still high up the hillside and by running he reached a point where he could look down on the yard. He leveled the glasses again and watched. He saw Marshall back the truck into the space beside the one-car garage, saw him reach down and cut off the ignition. He climbed out stiffly, pulled his coat out of the seat, shook it and flung it over his arm as

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he started for the house; a tired desert dweller come home after a night drive made to avoid the heat of the day.

Joe was stooping down, sniffing at the big gas can-teen when Bill arrived. She wrinkled her nose and screwed the top back on, shaking her head in acknowledgment of defeat.

"I had a brilliant idea, Bill, but the darn thing didn't work. I thought maybe it was the canteens, but this one's full of gas, and so is the other red one in the set. And over there one is half full of water and the other has oil. I'm knocked for a goal; how do you feel?"

"Foolish."

Joe had the cushion up and was feeling in the narrow tool box behind the gas tank. She slammed the cushion into place and stepped off the running board, scowling at the truck.

"This is certainly the mole's left eyebrow!" She turned on Bill. "Dad's about half pickled, this minute. I can tell by his walk and the way he kept nodding his head and whispering things to himself. Bill Woods, if you are in cahoots with him, and just playing me for a boob, there's going to be trouble around this ranch!"

Bill stared down at her with an expression in his eyes that brought a flush to Joe's cheeks.

"Well, I'm pretty darn desperate. And I can tell you by word of mouth, there's going to be polka dots on the moon when I find out. It's positively uncanny, the way he puts it over!"

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"Never mind, kid. You trot along to bed before your mother finds you haven't been in it all night. This is getting mighty mysterious, I'll admit, but we'll get to the bottom of it."

"Well, it's a wise father that can fool his beloved child," Joe declared, as she went off to the house, Lobo walking in her shadow.

Bill tarried long enough to put his own nose to the open top of each canteen that had traveled with the truck. He went so far as to stick his finger into the red ones and taste the contents — as if the smell had not been proof enough. Gasoline, beyond a doubt. A desert man would be a fool to drive across the desert without his emergency supply of gas, water and oil, and Joe had told him there were no service stations along the road — as indeed Bill knew.

He crawled under the truck and examined the chassis for a concealed tank and found no possible hiding place for one. He thought of the oil pan, but like most desert cars the hood had been removed for greater coolness and the oil pan was in plain sight, deep crusted with oil drippings and dust. There wasn't a cranny that would hold a pint bottle, and from the manner in which Marshall had shaken the dust from his coat, Bill judged the pockets were empty. Had there been something of an ostentatious flourish in that shaking? Bill wondered.

As he slipped into the bunk house he thought he saw some one standing close to the corner of the kitchen, watching him. He closed the door behind him, went

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straight to the window that looked toward the desert and straddled out, then slipped along the rear wall to where he could see the house. He was just in time to glimpse Marshall as he turned back into the kitchen.

Bill waited until he saw smoke belching white from the kitchen stovepipe and knew that Marshall was turning his attention to an early breakfast, before he crawled in at the window and went to bed. Dawn comes early in June and he knew that he would have at least three hours of sleep before the breakfast bell rang for him. He needed sleep, and he refused to think, to mull the mystery over in his mind until his brain was clearer than the night had left it. Marshall was safe enough for the present, he knew.

At nine o'clock breakfast Bill observed with some amazement the pellucid innocence of Joe and her mother, the serene unconcern of Barby. The goldfish with the longest tail had died in the night and the black swan had been discovered trying to gobble its remains as it floated just under the roof of the screen cage. The three women seemed all excited over it and Bill, knowing what he knew, mentally called them an ingenious trio and reflected upon the uselessness of trying to hide any real secret for long in this household. In their presence he felt awkward and self-conscious, and he wondered at the stupidity of Marshall in thinking that with all his cunning he could cover his sin from these three. Which brought him again to the crux of the mystery.

The thing was out of all proportion, in the light of

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last night's events. It struck Bill that a man so determined upon having what liquor he wanted would not make such elaborate attempts to conceal the fact. The normal attitude of a drunkard like Marshall is a certain brazenness in self-indulgence; a tendency to show that he will drink when he pleases. That, or a penitence Marshall lacked. Bill knew well enough that human nature has many a queer twist not to be accounted for by any psychological theory, but he also knew that Woods Morgan would never picture a drunkard of the mild type in this way. The reactions were overstrong; like preparing an emergency camp outfit to take along to a half-day picnic. Joe had recognized that illogical touch in her father's taking a supply of roofing nails along so that he could halt any attempt to follow him. For one thing, he could not have known that he would be followed, until after he had knocked Bill from the truck; there had been no chance to provide himself with nails, after that.

"It's a bootlegger's trick," Bill summed it up finally. "I used it myself on paper — but only as a last resort when the officers were crowding up on the gang. If he's peddling hooch he might go heeled — but he *can't* be. There was nothing in that truck but ore, and I packed that down from the mine myself. I know right where it comes from. I helped load it into the truck. I wouldn't put it past the old devil, but there isn't a chance of anything like that, unless Nelson ——"

He followed that thought slowly, carefully, taking each step with due attention to logic. He had never

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investigated Nelson, principally because Mrs. Marshall had vouched for him, but he meant to do so now. It was the only possible clue that he could think of, since Hank, in spite of his leering glances and the covert triumph that appeared now and then in his laugh, was eliminated perforce; not for his integrity but for his lack of opportunity.

It occurred to Bill that he had overlooked one possible hiding place in the truck, wherefore he found two empty gasoline cans and went down and drained the gas all out of the tank. There wasn't so very much; a bit over four gallons. He picked up a stick, measured the depth of the tank inside, then measured the outside — and looked up into the malevolent face of Charles Marshall who had stolen up on him while he was bent over the tank.

"I noticed your gas tank leaks, Mr. Marshall," Bill drawled after one startled breath, and pointed down to where he had spilled a little gasoline on the ground. "Thought I'd fix it, if you've got a soldering outfit."

Marshall's bloodshot eyes turned to the wet spot on the ground, then swung back to Bill's face, which told nothing. He cleared his throat and afterwards licked his lips with the tip of his tongue — a telltale habit.

"Thought you'd quit," he said carpingly. "Knew when you blew in here you were probably a thirty-day man. Time you left. You couldn't hold a job longer than a month, even if you tried. You're not worth your salt. Why don't you go?"

"Your wife asked me to stay a little longer," Bill

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said evenly. "I promised her I would. Have you got a soldering outfit?"

Again Marshall moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue.

"Down in the cellar," he told Bill grudgingly. "Mary was soldering some pans, I believe."

He did not offer to go after it, so Bill was obliged to go and leave him there. He took long steps, and when he dared he glanced back over his shoulder. Marshall was standing beside the truck just as Bill had left him, and when Bill returned after a hurriedly fruitless search in the cellar, Marshall was still standing beside the truck — but he was chewing something, and in his eyes was that same peculiar gleam which had marked Hank's glances at times. Bill could not swear to it, but he was morally certain that Marshall had enjoyed a hasty "nip" during his absence of five minutes.

Sudden, flaming anger flickered Bill's eyelids and rushed him into ill-considered speech.

"Where do you keep it, Marshall?" he asked sharply, though his voice was low and even. "You've got it somewhere."

"Ah — not in the gas tank, Bill. Better pour that gas back in and let the soldering go till the tank needs it." Marshall gave him a knowing look and started for the house.

"All right," Bill called after him hotly, "for the moment you win. But don't think I won't find out all about it, Marshall. I'll camp on your trail till I do."

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Marshall turned and eyed him, but he made no reply, and Bill poured back the gas and called himself a fool from every angle. Still, Marshall was already on his guard, as he had proved last night, and he had likewise betrayed his suspicion of Bill, so that no real harm had been done. Indeed, Bill was now doubly sure that Marshall had whisky hidden in the immediate vicinity of the truck. He spent the next half-hour in going over the neighborhood as painstakingly as a small boy in a peanut hunt, but he found nothing in the garage or around it; the truck he had already searched, though he went over it again to make sure, even testing once more the gas, water and oil in the running-board canteens.

"As Joe would say, this is the snake's toenail," he observed to himself, when finally he gave up the search. "Bet he carries it in that stiff straw hat of his; though the women ought to find it there, unless he sleeps with his hat on. Well, take me by and large, and I don't seem to carry the standard specifications for a sleuth."

He sat down on the shady side of the bunk house to think it over, and he was still thinking when Mrs. Marshall came out with a pair of boots belonging to Marshall, and a consuming curiosity to know what had passed between Bill and her husband, who had returned to the house showing all the symptoms of a rage the more deadly because it must be suppressed.

Bill told her while he tried on the boots, but Joe came along and sat down beside her mother and put her head on the maternal shoulder with an enigmatic

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glance at Bill from under her lashes. Mrs. Marshall matched that glance over Joe's head, and Bill eyed the borrowed boots and wished women weren't so darned cryptic. Had they been two men, he would have brought them into the open with one word; being women they must be humored in their secretiveness. He wanted to talk the thing over frankly with the two of them, to plan their next move. Instead of that they indulged in trivial patter for a while and went away together, Joe explaining spacioously why she had forgotten all about milking the cow that morning, and arguing that it was not necessary, since there would be just twice as much milk that night.

When they were gone Bill went down and searched again doggedly for hidden bottles, jugs, kegs or barrels — whatever could possibly hold liquor in any quantity over a teaspoonful. He heaved at rocks that might hide a cavity beneath; he lifted old cans, old sacks, sun-warped boards. He extended the search far beyond the corral, examined once more the stable and sheds. Then, having nothing else to do, he went to work on the tube that had been replaced by the spare last night. Seven nail points meant much patching and he was just finishing — having taken his time about it — when he was called for five o'clock dinner.

Marshall did not appear, and once more the pathetic deceit was maintained among the three women and Bill; the sorry pretence that all was well and every one was happy. Bill was rather glad when he could slip away to the bunk house where he need not watch

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his facial expression and his thoughts. He meant to visit Nelson's place, a mile or so away, but he needed the dark for that. In the meantime he strolled down past the corral and out along the trail, still looking, looking — and finding nothing.

He was sitting on a rock when he heard the unmistakable chug of a Ford coming up the trail, and in another minute a dilapidated vehicle came rattling into sight and slowed when the driver spied Bill and his pipe perched on the shady side of the road. Bill was in a particularly suspicious mood, just then, and his eyes were coldly watchful as they dwelt upon the tanned individual who drove; a stocky, dust-grimed man with droopy lids lending a cunning expression to his eyes, and a wide, humorous mouth that pulled sidewise when he smiled.

"How d'you do, sir?" he called cheerfully. "Will this road take me to Beatty?"

Bill drew another long breath of smoke, exhaled it in leisurely fashion and glanced at the road in question.

"It might — but you'd need to turn it around and stretch it considerably."

The man laughed and pulled a package of cigarettes from his pocket. Bill observed that the brand was one favored by fastidious smokers who need not consider the price, and it affected him like a false note in music. The rattletrap old Ford did not harmonize at all with cigarettes at the price those cost.

"You don't talk like a native," the stranger chal-

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lenced, striking a match on the paintless wheel.

"Camped near here?"

"No-o," drawled Bill. "Are you?"

"Will be, if I can find water enough to boil a pot of coffee," the man replied good-naturedly. "No hurry about getting to Beatty. I'm prospecting around for a good lease. I'd like to get hold of something that will pay better than wages, and they told me that over at Beatty — by the way, what ranch is this right ahead?"

"That's the Marshall ranch."

"Marshall. Mh-hmm — fellow that's been hauling out high-grade ore in sacks?"

"You're not guessing," said Bill coldly.

"Pretty good ore, they tell me."

"I reckon it pays to handle it." Bill stared into his pipe bowl, then knocked it bottom up gently against a rock. The man lied if he said he was a prospector — and smoked that brand of cigarettes habitually.

"I wonder if I could see Mr. Marshall. You're not he?" The question betrayed a sudden suspicion.

"No," said Bill, "I'm working for him. Boss is sick to-day. I'm afraid you can't see him." He paused and then added, "If you have any business with him, maybe I'll do."

"Oh, it isn't anything that can't wait," grinned the other. "Just wanted the dope on mining chances around here, and to see if I couldn't get some kind of a deal, perhaps. Mind if I camp on the ranch? I'll hobble the Ford," he chuckled.

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Bill grinned in spite of himself. Bootlegger the fellow might be and probably was, but Bill was forced to admit that he seemed a likeable cuss.

"Swing off toward the fence, just the other side of that rock heap. It's fairly solid ground, and you can drive right down to the ditch and camp under that mesquite." He walked close to the car and looked the other squarely in the eye, one lid lowered a trifle. "If you've got any liquid refreshments along," he drawled, "I'm the driest thing this side of Death Valley."

The man's eyelids drooped lower while he stared at Bill. He twisted his mouth in a grin and shook his head.

"*You're* not the driest thing on the desert — there's one ahead of you," he declared. "I was just making up my mind to ask if water was the best you could do for a fellow in my fix."

Bill looked at him and shook his head mournfully.

"Ain't it hell?" he sighed. "Wish I had old Volstead here where I could talk to him."

"Gosh!" ejaculated the stranger disgustedly. "He ought to be in *my* shoes. I could wish him no worse luck than that."

"Liar," thought Bill as he strolled back toward the ranch.

"Liar," muttered the prospector as he backed his Ford into the shade.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE TRAIL LEADS TO THE DESERT

BILL had never been near that part of the ranch where the tenant, Nelson, was living. He had never seen Nelson, for that matter. He was under the impression that the tenant was a clod of a foreigner who did the ranch work well enough but did not enter into the life of the Marshalls in any other way, and he wondered now why he had never before seriously suspected Nelson of making moonshine, or at least of bringing it to Marshall.

He walked wide of the house grove, keeping to the edge of the largest alfalfa field, and made his way leisurely toward the eastward. He did not want to arrive too early, and he hoped that Nelson would be in bed when he got there. At first Bill smoked, but when he had gone a half mile or so he put away his pipe lest the smoke should betray him.

It seemed to him a long mile to where the outbuildings of the Nelson place bulked vague in the starlight. He hoped there was no dog, but for fear there might be one he approached the place cautiously, stopping often to listen. The first building was a sketchy affair of corrugated iron, plainly used to house the farm implements. Bill poked about in there, sniffing occasionally, without detecting that particular odor he sought. Then, leaving the shed, he made his way to the next building.

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So he came finally to the house, a board shack of no more than two rooms. Through an open window came the sound of rhythmic snoring — proof enough that Nelson was lying within, at peace with his world. Bill went close, caught only the mingled odors of bachelor cooking where the cook likes plenty of onion flavor, and turned away with a half-smile and a faint wonder at the content of a man who has chosen a life of plodding toil in such complete isolation that his nearest neighbors seldom see him. What did Nelson think of life? What were his hopes and fears?

“Hopes he’s good for a lot of money before he gets caught,” Bill’s suspicions told his imagination. If Nelson were a moonshiner his mental reactions would be simple and sordid, with no romantic notions whatever.

Bill prowled about the place until close to midnight before he was convinced that Nelson did not answer to any of Bill’s preconceived notions of what a moonshiner should be like in his home. There was evidence enough that Nelson was a hard-working man who liked to live in an orderly fashion. The yard was immaculately clean, the corrals were in perfect repair, so far as Bill could determine by starlight and an occasional match blaze, the tools were well cared for, a rock building evidently intended for stable and storehouse under construction. A pile of covered cement bags beside the hand mixer, the general litter of building materials, was proof enough that Nelson’s spare time was not spent over a still.

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Bill went home and went to bed, tired out and completely baffled. It must be that Hank was, after all, the key to the situation. To-morrow he meant to go back to the Whistlerock and make as comprehensive a search as he had made here at the ranch. He ought to have done that before, but it was not too late, perhaps. Hank wouldn't suspect him after this long interval of routine work. He might even worm the truth out of the old scoundrel by pretending to think well of bootlegging or moonshining, or both.

It was late morning when Bill awoke. He raised upon one elbow to look at his watch, hot sunshine in the open door informing him that it must be near breakfast time, or even later. His hand went out negligently to the box at the head of his bed, hovered in midair while his eyes dwelt incredulously upon the bed opposite him, then dropped to become a brace when his body surged upright under the thin blanket. He stared, shut his eyes tightly for a few seconds, then opened them suddenly and stared again.

On the white spread which Mrs. Marshall had decided was none too good for the bunk-house beds, patches of dried blood gave mute testimony of tragic events. On the white pillow slip was the bold imprint of a bloody hand, fingers spread. On the floor beside the bed a puddle of blood, dried around the edges, with a film on top. Woods Morgan himself could not have painted a more sinister scene for the eyes of a peaceable man to rest upon when he first comes back from a night's peaceful slumber. A dead body

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upon the bed might have added a horrific detail, but it would as surely have robbed the room of its subtle air of dreadful mystery.

No old fireman ever got into his clothes any quicker than did Bill Woods that morning, and he took the path to the house at a run. But when he arrived his tone was much calmer than his emotions and he hoped that his words were fairly unalarming.

"Thought sure I was going to miss breakfast," he said to Barby, who was buttering toast at the kitchen table. "Am I the last one up?"

"Why, no. It isn't much later than usual, Bill. Auntie's just getting up, and Joe's milking the cow. Uncle Charlie isn't out of bed yet."

Bill did not say anything to that, but he walked around the end of the house and approached the screened rectangle where Marshall slept, well away from the house and its possible espionage. Those gruesome stains in the bunk house couldn't be explained too soon to please Bill, and as the head of the house Marshall could not do less than assume a certain sense of responsibility.

But Marshall's bed was unrumpled, his few belongings in perfect order. Bill stood for a minute looking, then returned to the kitchen, shaking his head. There was the prospector yet to be accounted for, but he would need to excuse his absence from breakfast while he went down to the camp.

"Did you want Charles for something?" There was no dodging the women — Mrs. Marshall had seen

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Bill pass her window, and she was waiting for him on the porch.

"I did, but he's up and gone."

"Why, that's strange! Charles seldom gets up before eleven o'clock, Bill."

"Does he make his own bed, as a rule?"

"I should say not! Charles never made a bed in his life, so far as I know." She gave Bill a searching look and came down the steps toward him, then started anxiously toward Marshall's sleeping place. "Don't try to keep things from me, Bill," she said tensely, glancing back at him. "Affairs are getting rather desperate with me; unless we can prevent Charles from getting liquor, I've almost decided to put him in a sanitorium somewhere. This can't go on."

Bill turned and followed her slowly with a vague idea that the sooner he told her the better, though he dreaded adding anything so sinister to her worries. She gave Marshall's bed no more than a passing glance and returned pale-faced to Bill.

"Something has happened to Charles," she said in a flat, lifeless tone. "He hasn't been near his bed, and that is something I never knew him to do before. Charles is curiously regular in his habits of sleeping. Bill, I'm afraid he has wandered off somewhere. What can we do?"

"Find him," said Bill, and forced his lips to smile. "There's the breakfast bell, Mrs. Marshall. Let's be sensible and eat our breakfast before we do anything else. He's no doubt curled up somewhere asleep —

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maybe took on a bit more than usual. It's nothing to worry about, you know."

"If he's going to act like this, I can't keep it from the girls much longer." Mrs. Marshall bit her lip to keep back her tears of utter discouragement, but she went with Bill to breakfast and even mustered a smile when she entered the door, and began at once to praise Barby's coffee and to find little, inconsequent things to talk about. Bill watched her with a growing wonder in his eyes. If she could put so brave a face upon her troubles, he surely could make shift to hide for a little while longer that gruesome evidence in the bunk house, he thought. Let them start the day comfortably, at least.

During the meal he had caught Joe's eyes fixed upon him, a question in their clear depths. Barby, too, seemed artificially cheerful. He was glad when he could catch Mrs. Marshall's glance and receive the signal to rise, for minutes seemed to him rather precious just now. That prospector needed looking after before he broke camp and left, if he had not done so already — which would not harmonize with his professed desire to see Marshall about a lease. He rather expected to find the man in camp, and he was on his way down there when Joe overtook him, running down the path with her bobbed hair flying in the hot wind that was blowing up from the desert. Lobo trotted patiently at the end of his leash.

"What's on your alleged mind now?" she demanded, when she had overtaken him. "Mom's wor-

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ried stiff about something — is it dad again? You'd better tell me," she added grimly, "because I'll find it out, anyway. What has dad been up to now, that I don't know about?"

"Nothing, so far as I know." Bill gave her an exasperated glance before it occurred to him that he might need Joe and her dog before he was through. "Your mother is worried because your father didn't sleep in his bed last night and he hasn't shown up yet this morning."

"Good glory!" She looked up at him appraisingly. "But that isn't all that's worrying you, Bill. What is it that you hate to have mother find out about? Do you know where dad is?"

"No." Bill looked at her sidelong, measuring that mature sagacity which struck so strange a note in her youthfulness. He never knew exactly where Joe stood on the path to womanhood. If he treated her like the child she was, he was as likely as not to be set in his place as a presumptuous fool; on the other hand, she was too young to be depended on, he thought.

"Well, what is it, then? I hope you don't think you can fool me, Bill Woods. Is it something about that prospector? Is he a bootlegger? I thought perhaps that is what brought him out here."

"I thought so, myself. But I don't know anything at all about him."

Joe walked along beside him until they had passed the corral and not once did she speak. Where Hank and the prospector had turned toward the ditch, Lobo's

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nose went to the ground investigatively, and Joe turned and watched him for a minute.

"All right, honey. You tell Joe all about it," she crooned, and the dog looked up adoringly into her face. She turned to Bill with a bit of a swagger. "You don't have to talk, you know. Lobo can tell me all I want to know. I didn't hear any airplanes in the night, so I guess we won't be long finding dad — and the prospector, too, if we want to badly enough to follow him up. His car's gone, but Lobo says there's something interesting around here. Go on, Lobo. You show Joe just what happened."

There was sense in that, Bill admitted to himself. He walked along behind the girl, Lobo pulling her forward as he forged against the stout leash. They came to the ditch, and it needed no dog to show them the imprint of a man's knees on the bank, a spatter of blood on a rock and the tracks going toward the mesquite tree where the stranger's car had stood.

"You see, that's plain as print," Joe announced in a superior tone when they stood where the car had backed and turned. "He's gone off, and some one was hurt and went with him." Her face paled a bit as the same thought struck them both, but she pulled herself together and turned again to the dog. "Now we'll just follow the trail back to where they started from, and see what happened."

Bill thought he knew where that trail would lead them, and he was right. Lobo stood with both feet planted on the doorsill, looked into the bunk house and

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whined before he walked stiff-legged with ruffed neck to the pool of blood.

Joe sat down abruptly on Bill's bed and stared white-faced at the marks on the counterpane. Horror filled her eyes, so that Bill involuntarily sat down beside her and laid one arm across her shoulders.

"It may not have been your dad who was hurt," he said in his low voice. "Probably it wasn't. This is what I saw when I woke up this morning. It's what I had on my mind at breakfast. It's pretty mysterious ——"

"Don't you know?" Joe turned her head slowly until her eyes met his. "It looks as if you had beamed somebody."

"It does, for a fact — but if it's necessary I think your dog will give me an alibi. I went up to Nelson's last night and prowled around till past midnight. You may put the dog on my trail and welcome."

"Lobo's a wonder, but he doesn't guarantee to tell the correct standard Waltham time," Joe pointed out with a faint smile. "But that's all right, Bill. I'll believe you as long as possible. And I can tell if it was daddy." She put the leash in Bill's free hand and rose. "Just keep Lobo here for a minute," she said, and was off before Bill could have answered her if he had wanted to do so.

Lobo proved himself a pup of intelligence beyond mere animal instinct. He sat down on his haunches and waited, wolflike in his patience — but with his nose pointed toward the open door. Bill knew by the gleam

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in the dog's eyes when Joe was returning. She was panting a bit, and she held a soiled soft collar in her hand.

"It's the one dad took off yesterday," she said. "Now, we'll get the whole story — if dad's mixed up in it."

Lobo took one sniff, gave Joe a glance of meaning and cast his eyes around the room before he got up and walked out, the two following. Beyond the door Lobo hesitated, then walked straight to the end of the bunk house and stopped beneath the window.

Bill heard Joe's breath drawn into her lungs in one quick gasp, but her voice was steady when she spoke.

"Pick it up, Bill — that wrench. I — I'd rather not touch it. Is that blood?" The last word she whispered.

"I'm afraid it is, kid."

"Well — just lay it on the window-sill till we come back. Now, Lobo, which way from here?"

Lobo gave her another glance, looked down at the ground and trotted with a shambling ease down the trail past the corral, as he had done before; only, he did not turn off this time toward the ditch but kept to the road.

"Better give him another whiff of collar," Bill suggested. "It doesn't look reasonable that your dad would start out for town afoot; not when there are two cars on the place."

"You can't fool Lobo," Joe retorted breathlessly,

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and kept on to where the footprints left the road and struck through the scattered desert growth.

"This looks crazy, Joe." But Bill did not refer to their work of trailing; rather, to the man who had gone that way before them.

"I can't help what it looks like, Bill. Lobo has taught me a lot of things about tracking. And it's plain enough that *somebody* went this way. If Lobo says it's dad, I say he knows more about it than we do."

For a full half-mile they followed the tracks, and Lobo gave no sign that the end of the trail was near. The ranch and its irrigated land lay farther to the left. Before them and to the right stretched the desert, flat and gray for mile upon mile to where the mountain range that divides Nevada from California for a space stood etched in purples and pale blues against the sky. The whistling, hot wind pushed steadily against them as if it would warn them back. Bill stopped and squinted under his lowered hat brim. Before them, as far as he could see for the clumps of sage, the footprints held straight, toes deep as of a man running.

"Here, kid. This won't do at all." He took her by the arm, halting her and the dog. "We'll wear ourselves out and be useless when we do find him. We haven't even got a canteen with us. And your mother will be wild with worry."

Joe's chin set stubbornly.

"Dad doesn't know what he's doing, and he's wandering around out here somewhere," she said fiercely.

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"Do you think I'm going to let him go — and be a regular Woods Morgan victim, maybe? You must be crazy, yourself."

"I don't see what Woods Morgan has to do with it," Bill flared irritably. "I'm talking plain common sense."

"You're not. You're talking foolishness. You'd have me go blandly back and let dad stay out here and furnish a regular Woods Morgan ending to the story. Coyotes gnawing the bones of the victim in the moonlight and so forth; sifting sand and desert dawns. I'll have you know he's my father, and where he can walk Lobo and I can follow and bring him back." She pulled to free herself, but Bill held on. Lobo turned, eyed Bill for a minute and lifted his lip at one side.

"You see. Lobo would make a Morgan finish of you in two shakes, if I told him to!"

"At your mercy!" Bill grinned down at her ironically. "But it just happens that I have no intention of leaving your father out here. What I mean is to go back and explain to your mother, and then drive back and pick up the trail right here. We couldn't carry ourselves back, much less your dad. Whereas with the car ——"

"I'm the dumbest thing when I'm worried!" Joe yielded unexpectedly. "But I won't go back. Lobo and I will keep on the trail, and you can bring the car — and tell mom. It better be the truck, because the lady car couldn't pull some of this sand. And throw in some blankets for daddy when we find him. He'll

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be tired, I expect. And hurry, Bill. I'm awfully thirsty."

"I wish you'd sit down somewhere under a bush and wait for me, kid." Bill laid his hand on her head, felt how hot her hair was and took off his own hat to give her. It dropped to her ears and he laughed.

"You'll get sunstruck, out here bareheaded. Now promise me you'll rest till I get here. You can't beat the car, so there isn't any sense in wearing yourself out, you know."

"And bring some sandwiches, Bill!" Joe had waited until Bill was trotting off bareheaded and was almost out of hearing before she called after him. Which is the way of womankind.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE DESERT LAUGHS AT BILL

BEFORE he reached the corral Bill considered his experience out in the full heat of the desert afoot sufficiently vivid. After trotting and walking a half mile bareheaded, with parched throat and the feeling that his back was blistering through the thin, light shirt he had borrowed from Marshall, he was sure that he knew just how it must feel to perish on the desert. More and more of the same sensations of thirst and heat and exhaustion, until the endurance snapped under the strain — that was all. He hadn't been far off, in all the stories he had written of the desert.

Then his professional pride rose up to battle. "A regular Woods Morgan finish!" Did Joe mean to discount his realism? She ought to know the desert well enough to see how true his pictures were. She'd find out, soon enough, unless they got to Marshall in time.

There was the mystery of the blood in the bunk house and on the wrench, the dog's story of the trail. That would make Marshall the aggressor — but who was the victim? Not the prospector, surely; unless he had recovered in a remarkable manner after the blow. He had been able to drive off in the night. Then, too, there had been two men at the ditch — the tracks proved that beyond question. Two had walked to the

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car. Yet there was the dog, trailing Marshall straight out into the desert!

The simplest explanation was to belittle the intelligence of the big pup, though Bill did not like to call Lobo a liar, for he loved dogs and his faith in them was strong. There was, of course, the bare possibility that the prospector had a companion who had chosen to walk in. An unlikely proceeding, especially in view of the fact that the front seat of the Ford had been piled half full of camp gear, leaving room for the driver only. Still, it was the only explanation Bill could think of that would account for all the foot-prints.

Barby and her aunt were at the bunk house, dumb with the horror of their discovery, panicky over the absence of Bill and Joe. It struck Bill that it would be nothing less than merciful to give them something to do. They rushed toward him when he came panting up the path, perspiration streaming from his crimson face.

"'S all right," he gasped. "I just came back — after the truck." He made straight for the water bucket and poured a dipperful over his head.

"Have you found Charles?" Mrs. Marshall's voice was thin, strident with fear.

"No-o — but no one was killed in here. I'm sure of that." He shook the water from his hair and grinned at them without any feeling of mirth.

"What you should do is take the car and follow that prospector who camped here last night. He went

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off with somebody — the kid and the dog trailed two men to where his car was parked. Another set of tracks lead out across the country, and we're following them. I came back after the truck — too far to walk. Joe thinks it's her father; I don't know what to think. But, anyway, if one of you can drive ——”

“We can both drive,” said Mrs. Marshall more calmly. “But where?”

“Wherever that Ford went,” said Bill. “I'll go fill up the gas tank for you while you get ready. Joe wants some sandwiches — I suppose for her father or whoever went off out there. Better hurry — don't wait to doll up ——”

“We're not quite that bad,” Barby retorted spiritedly. “When it's a case of life and death we can skip powdering our noses, I hope! Come on, Auntie. Bill's right. Don't keep us waiting, Bill!”

“Oh, bring Joe's hat, will you? I had to lend her mine.” Bill was running toward the garage.

Filling the gas tank was a maddeningly slow proceeding. First the gasoline must be siphoned through a short piece of garden hose into a can, then poured into the tank. The gasoline drum was two thirds empty and the siphon correspondingly hard to start, and Bill swallowed a mouthful of gas inadvertently when he was sucking hard on the end of the hose to start the gas running. Gasoline does not make a pleasant beverage and Bill was pretty sick for a few minutes. Moreover, being a new hand at that particular makeshift, he permitted the gas in the hose to run

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back into the drum while he poured the first canful into the tank on the touring car, and was obliged to start the suction all over again and be sick all over again before he could fill the second can.

"There's enough to get you to Goldfield, anyway," he muttered thickly, wiping the dust off the gas gauge with a forefinger while he screwed on the cap. Barby and her aunt were already in the car. "Wait till I look at the radiator—guess there's water enough in the canteen. That wind's mighty hot, and you'll have it behind you.—All right, folks. Plenty of water—oh, say! Don't take the straight trail across that first little dry lake, out ten miles. Some one spilt a lot of nails in the best road, so you'll have to go around."

He laid a grimy hand for just a second on Mrs. Marshall's gloved knuckles, ready on the wheel. The starter was whirring, the motor gave a cluck and began to purr. Bill's eyes sought hers reassuringly, then went to Barby's veiled face.

"Good luck, folks. Don't you worry for one minute. I'll look after this end of the job. If you don't run across any sign of that car, drive on into Goldfield and inquire there. If it looks too bad, tell the sheriff about it. Joe and I will bring in the fellow that struck out afoot. He couldn't go far, and we'll soon overhaul him with the truck. Then, if everything's all right, we'll stay right here and look after things till you come home; if it's your husband, and he isn't in good shape, we'll follow you up. So take

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your time — after you get there. No news from here is good news. *Adios.*”

Barby gave a squawk as the car was starting off, and twisted around in the seat, reaching behind her.

“ Oh, here! There wasn’t a thing to make sandwiches of, Bill. I used the last bit of bread for toast, because we were going to bake to-day. But I filled this bottle with milk — it’s all I had time for. You can cook whatever you want when you get back.”

“ Fine! Good luck to you!”

He stood for a moment watching them, then placed the bottle of milk in the truck seat and went to the bunk house for bedding. It was a great relief to have the two women off his mind for the present, and he told himself that they could trail the prospector’s car as well as any one. They had gone off calmly enough. No need to worry about them any longer.

Barby had forgotten to bring down Joe’s hat, but Bill found an old felt hat in the bunk house which would do for himself. No use wasting time on non-essentials — he was uneasy over Joe, out there in that hot sun alone. What if a rattlesnake should bite her, or a tarantula or scorpion or centipede? She might even run across a rabid coyote — though the dog would probably protect her from anything larger than snakes and insects.

He threw the blankets and pillow into the back of the truck, looked to make sure the radiator was full, and thought of the gas tank. The idea of siphoning more gas out of the drum made him retch.

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"Four gallons in the tank, five — six, seven in the two canteens — that's enough to carry us a hundred miles if we had to go that far. Might need water, though."

He found an extra canteen and filled it, then cranked and started, driving as fast as was practicable after he left the road, the tires sinking into the loose soil deeper than Bill had expected. The kid was right about it, the touring car couldn't have pulled through the sandy patches. Even the truck had to take some of the hollows in compound low.

But he made it well enough by using intermediate and compound. It surprised him that he could not travel at all in high. But then it occurred to him that the wind probably had a good deal to do with it. He strained his eyes ahead after the first few hundred yards, hoping to see Joe waiting for him where he had left her. It was easy enough to follow their tracks, but he was obliged to make many detours with the car, to avoid high brush, rocks or those small, bothersome corrugations that wrinkle the greater part of the desert. Striking straight across country with a car was not so simple as he had thought it would be, but it was nevertheless a vast improvement on walking, especially when they would have to bring back Marshall.

Joe had gone on with Lobo. Bill thought he saw her hat bobbing along, far ahead; but the brush was whipping in the wind and he could not be certain. He could only follow the trail as best he could, grinding along sometimes at the pace of a desert turtle where

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the sand was softest. At that rate Joe could keep ahead of him as long as she could walk, but he could not help that. To attempt a faster progress meant that he would spin the rear wheels and heat the engine without getting anywhere at all. He simply had to take his time or stall the car.

"She'll see the truck coming," he told himself after a while, when he had successfully negotiated a gully that threatened for a time to hold him there. "If she's got any sense at all she'll wait."

But Joe did not wait, and Bill almost lost her trail permanently when he had to drive around another deep wash and then found himself in a nest of rocks. He was compelled to get out and move a dozen or so before he could get through without cracking an axle or the crank case.

To top his troubles and delay him further, a front tire went flat and Bill suspected a slow valve leak — than which there is no tire trouble more exasperating when one hasn't an extra valve. He removed the tire, failed to find any puncture in the tube, removed the valve, cleaned it with gas which he let out of the carburetor, and replaced the same tube within the same tire and spent a hot fifteen minutes becking and bowing over the tire pump. Woods Morgan had dealt men more misery, ticking out troubles without mercy to his characters, but Bill Woods couldn't think of anything worse than what he was doing just then; whereas he was merely taking the fortunes of the desert trail and having no unusual misadventures.

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He climbed up and stood clinging to the cab top while he looked for Joe. She was not in sight, so he was forced to drive down along the edge of the gully until he picked up her trail again; which cost more time and gasoline, though it was the wasted minutes which worried him. The child had been thirsty when he left her. She must be suffering acutely now, he knew. He tried to hurry along, racing the engine and then shifting into high gear. But the wheels gouged too deep and the wind blew too hard against him, so that he stalled the engine and had to get out and crank.

He looked back toward the ranch and was surprised to see it lying below him, at the foot of what seemed to be a very definite slope of three miles or so. He had not dreamed that he was climbing a hill, but that might account for the drag on the car; though it might well be one of those optical delusions with which the desert delights to fool men's eyes. He strained his eyes ahead, but the Joshua trees standing here and there over the great expanse looked so human that there was no knowing whether he saw Joe or Marshall or a yucca in any of the objects standing above the brush. At any rate the truck could scarcely be overlooked. Joe would be watching for it and could not possibly miss seeing its high, black top.

He drove on, staring ahead at the tracks and beyond at the desert. It was with a stupefying sense of amazement that he heard Lobo's deep "*Wooh! Woohh!*" behind him and off to the right. His head swung that way as he abruptly cut off the ignition and stopped.

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There was Joe, sitting cross-legged in the scant shade of a Joshua tree, fanning herself with Bill's hat.

"Rotten service, is what I mean!" she croaked with indomitable spirit, when Bill ran back to her, swinging the extra canteen by its canvas strap. "I thought I told you two hours ago that I was thirsty!"

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE LAUGH TURNS GRIM

"DAD's some hiker," Joe observed, when her own thirst was satisfied and she had given Lobo a drink out of Bill's hat-crown. "He must have walked all night. We'll have to keep right on his trail — I don't suppose the old dear took a drop of water with him, and this wind simply blows all the moisture out of one's system. I couldn't have gone another yard on a bet, and I'm used to hiking. I don't see how dad could possibly keep it up much farther; do you, Bill?"

Bill was contemplating the front tire, which had gone flat once more. There was nothing to do but pump it up again, so he got out the pump and stood back to the wind, pumping until his back ached. The brief jaunt was dragging out toward noon in spite of him, and he did not want to discuss Marshall's probable whereabouts and condition with Joe, who had waited until she was certain her question would go unanswered and then had climbed into the truck and sat staring sourly out across the wind-whipped desert.

Bill cranked, threw the pump into the truck and crawled behind the wheel.

"You'd better take off the leash and let the dog run," he said, as he released the brake. "This wind is a fright. I overlooked your tracks where you left the trail, and it's going to be hard to follow one set of footprints."

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Joe made no reply, but she unsnapped the leash from Lobo's collar and pushed the dog out with her foot. Lobo misunderstood her intent, evidently thinking his abrupt dislodgment an accident; for he looked up at her reproachfully, timed a jump and scrambled in over her feet.

"Dumb-bell! What do you think you are — a tourist?" She pulled the limp collar from her overalls pocket and proceeded to wipe his nose with it impatiently. "Get out!" she ordered. "Go find dad. Go on, you lazy thing!"

Bill had stopped the car, but Lobo flattened his pointed ears and lay as flat as he could. He was passive as a dead dog while Joe cuffed his ears and scolded.

"Maybe if you get him started on the trail again he'll hold it, and you can hop in," Bill made bold to suggest. "He's only a pup, you see — and he loves his Joe girl."

"I don't want that kind of love," snapped Joe. "He hates d-daddy, is what ails him. He doesn't *want* to find him unless I'm right there with the leash in my hand. Lobo! You ——"

"Listen, kid." Bill laid a hand on her shoulder. "I've owned a dog or two, myself, and I find it's bad business to raise an issue unless you can be sure of the outcome. Right now is a kind of poor time to fight with the pup, don't you think? You slide over here and drive, and I'll walk and watch the trail. The dog will be all right, after a bit. He's afraid you're going

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to drive off somewhere and leave him stranded, is all ails him."

"I hate a quitter!" Joe's lip trembled. "I'll give him away. I'll shoot him! I won't have a dog that doesn't play the game all the way through! I hate a dog that sticks back his ears and flattens out just when you need him the most. I'll ——"

Bill was ten rods from the truck and he failed to hear what more Joe would do. Having had a sample of her displeasure with himself, he did not worry about the dog. Nor did he glance back. Joe had not killed the engine, at any rate. She would come along if he left her alone, so he bent to the wind and plodded ahead, following the blurred footprints that led on and on into the desert. After a bit he heard the truck coming and heaved a sigh of relief. That particular storm was over.

He came to another gully too deep for the car to cross where Marshall had gone, and turned back, waving the girl to a stop while he scouted along the bank for a passable crossing. Joe leaned out and shouted into the wind, but he could not hear what it was she was saying, until he had gone back almost to the truck.

"Hey! The tire's flat again!"

Bill swore and went up and yanked the pump from the car. At this rate Marshall could die before they overtook him. He unscrewed the dust cap from the valve stem, attached the pump tube and began to pump.

"What did you do with the sandwiches, Bill? I'm starving."

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Bill stopped pumping and looked at her glumly.

"There's a bottle of milk right beside you."

"I despise milk. I want a sandwich."

"Barby said we could cook whatever we like when we get back." Bill's tone was heavy with sarcasm. Speaking of sandwiches reminded him of something he was trying to forget; which was a neglected breakfast.

"Do you mean to tell me ——?"

"Sandwiches is what we have anything else but. Barby used the bread for toast." He went back to lifting and pushing the pump-handle — a form of exercise which never can be made popular. He heard things then about Barby, but he did not stop his pumping to listen. He tossed the pump into the truck and was starting on when he swung abruptly back.

"Where's the dog?"

"On his way home, I expect. I gave him a whipping and told him to beat it."

"Bright trick."

"He's no good parked on my feet with his eyes shut, is he? That dog's got to mind if I have to break his neck!"

Bill shut his teeth on a sentence that would have opened a battle. Joe was so red and warm and tired and discouraged that he hadn't the heart. After all, she was a game kid, and a sulky dog will wear out the patience of the most forbearing soul in the world. Bill patted her on the shoulder instead and grinned.

"Let me sniff that collar, Joe, and I'll double for

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him till these Joshua trees grow bananas. Come on, little Joe — you won't have to whip *me* and send *me* home."

"I shall, if you don't shut up about things to eat," Joe retorted, flushing under his intent look.

"Well, slide over and let me coax the old boat across this wash. She's liable to stand on her ear, and if I yell I want you to jump and no argument about it, young lady. I know where your dad crossed, and we'll pick up the trail beyond. Don't need no dog, nohow."

"In other words, buck up." Joe gave him a reluctant smile. "Oh, Bill, you may try to fool me, but — I'll do my jumping now, and keep dad's trail right under my eyes."

She was out and gone with the same verve which Bill had come to associate with her in his mind, and with a smile and an upflung hand she ran down into the gully and up the other side.

Bill watched her across before he started the car. His eyes held a new glow and his thoughts formed half a sentence. "Another three or four years, and little Joe Marshall ——"

There came a time when they looked back and saw only the gray-green bushes, that looked all gray in the distance, standing ragged against the purple of the Grape Vines. Before them a wide expanse, pale as wheat straw, lay like a huge platter broken against the stark hills beyond. Now that the crest of the slope was passed, the truck picked up speed and bounced

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along quite as fast as any car would dare travel. Joe was driving and she was obliged to stop now and then to wait for Bill to scout out the trail ahead.

"He surely wouldn't get out on that dry lake," Bill panted, swinging on to the running board as Joe came up, and standing there clinging to the braces and keeping his eye to the trail. "We want to keep a sharp lookout from now on, kid. He can't have gone much farther than this."

"It feels as if that tire is flat again," Joe informed him apathetically. "Maybe you'd better take a look."

The tire was flat. Bill pumped it up again while Joe walked ahead to spy out the footprints and save time, and when Bill finally overtook her they changed places, Bill walking ahead while Joe followed with the truck. Bill figured that they were making much better time than Marshall could possibly have done, and he did not believe that even a man in delirium would walk much farther than they had come. He wondered if Joe had noticed how erratic the tracks had become in the last mile; how they weaved back and forth like a sailboat tacking against the wind. Still, they made toward the lake — Bill wondered why.

There were fewer washes on this side of the low ridge, less of that corrugated terrane which made slow going. They hurried on into the howling, hot wind that blew straight up from Death Valley fifty miles away and reaching bare arms closer, wherever the hills failed to bar the way. The dry lake before them was

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perhaps a far-flung tentacle of that accursed replica of one of Dante's visioned purgatories.

"I think we're out of gas," Joe shouted into the wind, when the motor gasped and stalled in a shallow depression.

Bill turned back, dragging his feet a little in the sand.

"All right, hop out and I'll see."

"Didn't you fill the tank, Bill?" Joe climbed in behind the cab for sake of the shade, and peered over the seat-back while Bill pulled out the cushion and unscrewed the cap from the tank.

"I didn't. I knew how much was in the tank, and I knew we had plenty in the canteens. I was in a hurry. Besides, I didn't count on so much low gear."

"Well, don't apologize. I merely wondered if we'd used a tank full already; because if that was the case — we've got to get back, you see, and it would take some thinking."

"Yes. Well, we've used four gallons, just about. And we have seven gallons along. It's all right, kid. We've been making good time the last five or six miles. We won't have much farther to go."

Joe gave a little sigh, quickly repressed. Bill unfastened the five-gallon canteen from the running board nearest him, brushed off the twigs of sage that had caught in the fastening when they ploughed through bushes, and unscrewed the cap, lifting the heavy canteen to where he could tilt it over the opening in the gas tank.

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"I hate to spill any of this," he remarked, setting the can upright. "There ought to be a funnel, but there isn't. Let's see." He studied the situation for a minute, then grinned widely.

"My gigantic intellect is still percolating," he boasted, and pulled off his hat, set it upside down over the hole and with a convenient screwdriver from the tool box punched a sizable hole in the felt. "We may want every drop of this gas," he went on cheerfully, "because it's going to be uphill for a while, and I wouldn't put it past that wind to change and blow in our faces again."

"You'd better pour fast," Joe advised skeptically, "because gas will soak right through that felt."

Bill had not thought of that peculiarity which will send gasoline through chamois that holds back water, but he made no reply; time was still precious and he lifted the canteen once more, tilted it well over the hat crown and began to pour.

He lifted his eyes and stared at Joe, who stared back at him incredulously. A gush of gasoline had ended abruptly as it had begun, and the canteen refused to give up another drop.

"Why — I thought it was full!" cried Joe.

"It is," said Bill. "Stopped up, maybe. Cork inside, or something." He shook the canteen with an audible sloshing sound, then tilted it suddenly again. There was no gas. He stared again at Joe, who leaned over the back of the seat, gazing at the canteen.

He shook the canteen, ran a forefinger into it and

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held it there for a moment, feeling carefully. He set the canteen down on the tank and began to experiment with the screw-top collar. It turned, after a twist or two, and he began to unscrew it. The thing that he presently pulled out might have been a long test tube made of aluminum. Bill put his nose to the canteen and gave one sniff.

"Whisky," he said in a curiously flat tone.

"*Whisky?*" Joe stared blankly at the canteen.

"Close to five gallons of hooch." Bill gave another sniff as if to assure himself that he had not made a mistake.

Joe looked at him, looked at the hat that had been made to perform the duty of a funnel, looked again at Bill. She gave a shriek of laughter, born not of amusement but of worry and weariness and now — fear.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

NOTHING TO DO BUT KEEP GOING

BILL halted, glaring down at the slim little person in the blue bib overalls. The drooping figure moved forward until Bill halted the girl by the simple method of catching her by the arm and hanging on.

"You go back to the truck and stay there! Do you want me to tie you up?"

"Now don't get tough! Go back and stay yourself, if you think the truck ought to be stayed with. Let go of my arm. You're merely holding up the parade."

Bill released the arm and got her by the shoulder, schooling himself desperately to persuasion.

"Listen, little Joe. You're fagged, right now. There's no sense whatever in your idea of going on. I'll go — I can go much faster and easier if I know you are safe at the truck and I needn't worry about you. When I find your father he may need to be carried. I'll have a sweet time, won't I, packing in the two of you?"

Joe tilted her head far back so that she could look up at him from under her wide hat brim.

"Don't kid yourself, Bill. I'm no more fagged than you are. And we don't either of us amount to much if we can't hike all around dad. I'm going along so I can carry the canteen and dad's feet. I guess I'll come in pretty handy."

Nothing to Do but Keep Going

"Now, Joe ——"

"Look here!" Joe spoke through set teeth. "You can't bully me and boss me, just because I laughed over your wild preparations to pour a teacupful of gas into the tank. I appreciate the shower, all right — but you wasted a lot of water on me when I didn't need it. I *wasn't* hysterical. I *always* laugh like that. And you can't stop me from going. I've got to. It's — daddy."

"You know what happened to Lobo when he wouldn't mind," Bill stated darkly. But when he started on he was holding Joe's hand clasped tight in his own and helping her along, the water canteen slung over his shoulder. Joe was carrying the bottle of milk, which they both refused to touch, tacitly reserving it for Marshall. Joe wondered if Bill thought she had completely forgotten his first meeting with her, when he had drunk half a coffeepot of milk fresh from the cow; and Bill wondered if Joe thought he had never observed her tall glass of milk at every meal. But neither mentioned these small matters.

The footprints had become erratic and hard to follow, as if Marshall had lost all sense of direction and walked at random. They found the marks of wallowing, where he had fallen down and groped about in the sand for a space before he got to his feet again and wandered on. Neither made any comment upon those grim signs, nor upon the places where the tracks went into some high bush and out again. And although each stole furtive glances at the sun, neither spoke of

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the amazing speed with which it was setting — until Bill had worked out a solution.

“Soon as it’s dark enough we’ll light bushes along the trail. A couple of dry sage stubs will make corking desert torches. It will be a heap better than now, kid. Your dad will see our fires and come back to meet us. Probably this wind will go down too. It will be a snap. Won’t have long to wait, now. Sun’s almost down.”

After a moment Joe gave a hysterical laugh which she checked immediately.

“One way to handle your worries is to turn the darn things wrong side out and make them look pretty. Instead of seeing our Morgan finish, we’ll all sing ‘Roamin’ in the gloamin’.’ It’s the elephant’s powder puff when you look at it with your left eye shut, isn’t it, Bill?”

“I wish you’d let up on Woods Morgan,” Bill said pettishly.

“Why? Are you a warm admirer of his?” She waited for the retort which did not come, then added resignedly, “That’s all the thanks one ever gets for bucking up and being brave. I suppose you’d rather have a Morgan heroine on this party: limpid eyes and creamy skin and gobs of sentiment over the sunset.”

Bill let go her hand.

“Well, all right. Make it as pleasant as possible! To add to the romance, how would you like a plate of fried chicken right now?”

“I’ll run down a jackrabbit for you if you like.”

Nothing to Do but Keep Going

She was beginning to fall farther and farther behind, so Bill relented and once more took her hand and pulled her along. He wondered if the child realized the gravity of the situation, or whether she was simply tired and hungry and cross. He never dreamed that Joe, dragging her feet wearily beside him, was wondering if he was such a tenderfoot as to think this a mere trifling incident.

They walked and walked. Bill lighted greasewood bushes, which will burn fiercely for two or three minutes and then char and go black when the stiff, tarry-sapped needles are consumed. It made slow work of the tracking, because they must wait until a lighted bush flared beside the last visible footprints, then follow the tracks as far as they could see them in the ruddy glow and fire another bush before continuing farther. They lost their sense of direction because of the thin haze of clouds that obscured stars and moon, and time became merely a matter of gauging their endurance and Marshall's. If it *were* Marshall who had fled into the desert. Bill was beginning to doubt Lobo's testimony on the identity of the man they were following. It did not seem possible that Marshall would come so far afoot, or that he had been the man who evidently had stood outside the bunk house and struck down an unknown man through the window. It was more likely that Marshall was the victim of that blow, though he would never hint it to Joe, who was pinning her faith to the dog's trailing.

Yet the footprints beside the ditch and out here in

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the sand did not fit the probable facts, and Bill was too tired to use his power of deduction very successfully. It was clear that some one had run off here into the desert, last night. Joe and Lobo insisted that it was Marshall. The quickest way to make sure was to overtake the man and see who he was, and Bill's tired brain was glad to let it rest there. Mrs. Marshall would follow the other clues, he was sure.

"We seem to be traveling toward home again," Joe observed in a flat, tired voice, when they stopped for a minute to wait for a fresh fire to blaze up so that they could see. "Unless the wind has changed. Look at the smoke." Then she added wistfully, "It doesn't look as if daddy is very close, or he'd come to the fire. Can't you call him, Bill?"

"Better save our breath for walking," Bill demurred. "We're on his track, Joe girl. I could holler my head off without accomplishing as much as a half hour of plugging right along will do."

Joe said nothing to that, but when they had passed to the extreme edge of that firelight and must wait for another she herself began to call, her voice infinitely beseeching out there in the night. Bill's heart ached for her, but he would not yield to the impulse of wasting his energy in useless shouting. Nor could he steel his nerves against Joe's tragic young voice imploring the daddy who might be dead, for all they knew. He set his teeth and knelt doggedly beside a bush that refused to blaze up and shed the light it should, and coaxed it with dry twigs. But whenever Joe cried,

Nothing to Do but Keep Going

"Daddy! *Daddy!*" an unpleasant crimple went from Bill's scalp to his toes.

"There's a coyote following our trail," he said with a suddenness that stopped Joe on the edge of another shrill cry. He had reached the point of sheer nerves when he knew he was going to shake her if she persisted in that wailing call.

"Where?" Joe gave a half-sob and moved closer to Bill. "Do you suppose it'll come at us?"

"Wait. See those two greenish lights back there? He's stopped to watch us."

Joe saw them and reacted in the purely feminine way by catching Bill by the arm and swinging herself behind him. And Bill himself reacted instinctively to the wordless call for his strength and courage to protect her from danger — fancied or real, it made no difference to either just then. Almost without thinking, he pulled his Luger from where it hung safe inside his belt and fired at those two greenish points of light.

On the heels of the report came a yelp of surprise and pain, and Joe stiffened and went limp against Bill.

"It's — it sounded — like Lobo," she whispered aghast. "I ——" Her knees gave under her and she went down in a huddled little heap, her fingers still clawing weakly to retain their hold on Bill's reassuring strength.

Bill stooped, caught her by the shoulders, hesitated and then eased her to the ground, his mind a confused mixture of emotions in which the dominant sensation

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seemed to be consternation. He hurried back to where the eyes had looked at him in the dark, bent over the animal and felt gropingly for the head and neck. His fingers encountered a warm, sticky spot in the hair; that, and a collar there was no mistaking. His head turned involuntarily and his eyes tried to bore through the gloom to where Joe lay huddled beside the bush that would not burn but sent tiny wisps of pungent smoke into the air to be whipped out in thin streamers with the light breeze that blew.

"Good Lord — I shot her dog!" Had it been a man he would not have felt much worse over it just then. He had forgotten all about Lobo — had taken it for granted the dog had gone home long ago. He bit his lip, too sick at heart to realize or care that he was shaking, that his groping hands could scarcely control their motions sufficiently to find the heart, to see whether it was still beating.

"Bill! Where *are* you, Bill?"

A lonesome little cry, coming out of the dark like that. Bill muttered something through his teeth, slid his arms around the limp body and rose. In a moment he came striding up to Joe, her dog in his arms.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

WHAT MARSHALL WOULD DO TO A SPY

IN the deepening dusk of that evening when the prospector came, Charles Marshall stood just inside the doorway of the garage, his lean neck craned like a wild turkey on guard for the flock. He looked, listened, lifted a pint flask to his lips and took a long gurgling drink. He craned again, peering into the faint light cast by the new moon not quite so near to setting as it had been the night before. If that damned, snooping Bill Woods happened along — spying — watching —

“I’ll kill him as I would a snake!” The thought took definite form in his mind, forced itself into audible speech. “The sneaking spy! The ingrate! Took him in when he was crippled — nursed him and fed him, and that’s the thanks! Bites the hand that fed him. Snoops and watches and spies — crawls in the grass like a snake! I’ll kill him — clear self-defense. He’ll ruin me if I don’t stop him — a man’s home is his castle — can’t come limping in here and play the spy — Hank was right; he’s a treacherous hound — world has no place for a sneak —”

He listened again, his fuddled brain reading danger in the very stillness of the evening. He stooped, felt for something in the pale light, stood up, balancing the thing in his hand; a pipe wrench such as plumbers carry for repair jobs.

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“Get him in the bunk house — saw him go in. Every hour means danger. Got to stop his damnable searching and spying — stop it once for all — stop his mouth too — they’ll think — no matter what they think — got to stop him right away before he — before — damnable spy — stop his damned spying ——”

His muttering dwindled to whispers, to silence. He slipped from the garage, keeping well in its shadow, edged to the shade of the hill. He was afraid his wife might discover that he was not in his bed, but the piano was going in the living room — Henrietta and the girls were there. He would be in bed ——

He moved cautiously along in the shadow until he reached the rear of the bunk house, where he stood craning and listening, his suffused eyes peering and prying, his ears strained to catch a sound. From the open window of the bunk house came the sound of a man clearing his throat; a sleepy sound, mechanical and faint, no intent behind it. He started, stopped, slipped along by the wall; a step sidewise, a pause while he craned and listened, another step, a pause.

He was by the open, unscreened window; the window where Bill had crawled out to watch him, that morning — though he did not know that and it would have been but one more item against the man he thought a dangerous enemy. He listened. He thought he heard steady breathing, thought it sounded close. His eyes turned once to the young moon slipping down to stand for a moment on the high peak

What Marshall Would Do

before it went seeking the sun. It shone faintly in at the window. He could see ——

Very cautiously he lifted the wrench and held it ready while he pushed his lean face forward on his long neck and peered in. He stiffened, licked his lips. It seemed to him that Fate had placed his enemy carefully to receive the blow of vengeance; sitting on the edge of the bed, arms folded upon his knees, head bowed, drowsy, only half awake after a sleep. Yawning ——

Marshall blinked, set his teeth hard together, reached in and struck at the bowed head; a vicious blow that meant to kill. He heard the dull impact of steel against flesh. The sound sickened him a little and he drew back frightened. He looked at the wrench and the thin moon showed him that it was wet and red.

A sound behind him made him start and turn. A man was almost upon him, reaching out to grasp him by the shoulder. Marshall gave a choked kind of gasp, dropped the wrench and ran. Straight down the trail, past the corral and on beyond toward the young moon he went, and the sound of running feet followed him, drove him on. A hundred yards, two hundred, three hundred — he left the road then and ran wildly out through the sagebrush, swinging a bit to the left, which brought him running south. The pursuing footsteps halted where Marshall left the trail and the man stood there watching until the fleeing figure merged into the vague outlines of the sage. He shook his head at some thought and went back to the

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bunk house, where the sound of groaning and swearing greeted him as he stepped into the gloom.

"That you, Charley? Gawd, he tried t' kill me! Why n't yuh stop 'im? *N-n-nhnn!*" He groaned dismally as those fated souls beyond the river Acheron. "Gawd, he put' near killed me! Told yuh Bill was up t' somethin'. *N-n-nhh!* Mashed m' head in — rock er somethin'. Right through the window — I'll kill 'im fer that! *N-n-nhhh!*"

"*Sshh!*" warned the man in a whisper. "He'll hear you and come back to finish the job. Come on — I'll get you out of here before he comes to see ——"

He took Hank's arm, urging him with a gentle pull to rise and follow. Hank yielded dazedly, stifling his groans and whispering terrible epithets against Bill. Half the time his eyes were shut tight with the pain of his hurt and he never dreamed that he was not being assisted by Marshall. Hank owned plenty of that kind of nerve which is sometimes called gall, but his capacity for endurance was slight. Joe would not have made more fuss over a bleeding scalp wound than did he; perhaps not so much. The fact that he was able to keep up a fairly coherent stream of curses and threats indicated that his wound was not going to prove fatal. The prospector's mouth twisted sidewise in a sardonic grin.

"C'm down t' tell yuh we got t' have another packer — *n-n-nhhh!* M' brains is layin' wide open! — better git two, fer Bill won't live long after I set eyes on 'im — *n-n-nhh!* Oh, Gawd!"

What Marshall Would Do

The prospector piloted him quietly down to the irrigation ditch below the corral, pressed Hank down upon his knees and scooped water with both hands to wash the blood from the wound. It was a nasty hurt, though superficial. The square corner of the wrench had glanced on Hank's round dome and had peeled up the scalp in a jagged patch that would need several stitches before it would heal, and would leave an extensive scar. He was still bleeding copiously.

"You're going to need a doctor to sew that up," the prospector diagnosed after he had turned a flashlight briefly on the wound.

"Hunh?" Hank sat down abruptly on the bank and peered at the other through the gloom. "Thought you was Charley Marshall! Who 'n hell *are* yuh?"

"Just a prospector, camped right close by. I was going up to the house to see if I could buy some eggs and milk — and maybe a loaf of bread. Saw somebody reach in through the window and then beat it. So when I heard you groaning in there, I thought I'd better investigate."

"Well-I'll-be-dogged!" Hank shot the sentence out in one breath. He thought fast — much faster, probably, than his brain cells had ever turned over in his life before. "Prospector, ay?" He tilted his head and eyed the other blearily. One hand went involuntarily to his blood-stained beard, which he did not notice at the time. Hank was thinking, and he could never think comfortably unless he had hold of his whiskers.

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The prospector was wetting his handkerchief in the ditch. Now he stood up, wrung the cloth lightly, flipped it open and began folding it bandagewise.

"I'll tie this on to keep the dust out of that gash, brother. They say that it's the road dust that breeds tetanus germs."

"Huh?"

"Lockjaw germs. That's a bad-looking cut you've got, and I'd better rush you in to the doctor. I wouldn't be surprised if you had concussion, along with the abrasion."

Hank groaned.

"Wish I had a little good whisky to give you. That would brace you up for the journey. You've lost a lot of blood, do you know it?"

Hank groaned again.

"I gotta — see Charley," he muttered weakly.

"That will have to wait, I'm afraid. You're losing strength fast — I can see that. It's a long ways to Goldfield. Come — can you manage to walk to the car?"

Hank didn't know whether he could or not. A deadly chill was creeping up his spine and there was a coldness under his belt.

"Prob'ly Charley's got some booze," he whimpered as the prospector pulled him to his feet.

"Afraid we daren't wait. I'll drive like Billy-be-damn. Don't you worry, old fellow — I'll get you in alive or I'll make Henry Ford look foolish. Come — buck up. It's only a few steps to the car, and I'll just

What Marshall Would Do

have to fill the radiator and start. Lean on me as hard as you like. Feeling faint?"

"N-n-nhh!" groaned Hank feebly.

"All right — here we are. Now, wait till I get the blankets fixed in the back. Luckily I hadn't unpacked much. Here you are — can you get your feet on the running board? I'll — wait, hang on while I get in front where I can pull you in. That's right. Lie right down on those blankets, and I'll throw this over you."

He fussed with the bedding, meticulously arranging a cushion for Hank's head, which undoubtedly ached considerably. You simply can't have your scalp torn up like the flap of an envelope without feeling uncomfortable above the collar button.

Hank gasped and groaned and was convinced that he would never live to reach Goldfield.

"'F I don't make it through," he gasped, between moanings that scarcely would have belittled the tortures of the rack, "Bill Woods is my murderer. Remember that — Bill Woods done it."

"I'll remember," the prospector promised gently. "Better let me tie you in with this rope. It will help hold you steady and protect your head from further injury."

Hank did not reply, and the prospector proceeded to rope him securely to the braces of the Ford top. Hank in his misery was grateful for the support the ropes gave him, never thinking that they might as easily be considered bonds.

The young moon was long gone when the prospector

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dumped his few cooking utensils into the car, climbed in and put his foot on the starter. He wheeled slowly but surely in the loose soil, pointed the radiator toward Goldfield, approximately, and proceeded to stir up the dust along the road. Behind him Hank grunted and mumbled curses and, finally, makeshift prayers to the God he seldom dreamed of supplicating.

The prospector smoked his expensive cigarettes and grinned with the sardonic twist to one corner of his mouth, and drove like a wild man through the night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

MARSHALL FIGHTS HIS FIGHT

MARSHALL stopped and listened, his eyes straining into the dark. A car was leaving the ranch — driving swiftly down the trail, the flicking wisps of light on bush and rock showing the speed with which it traveled. Into his fuddled brain crept a chill dagger of a thought that thrust aside the whisky fumes and planted a new frenzy instead. The murder had been discovered and they were going for the sheriff! His own wife — it must be his wife — or Joe; unless the strange man who had almost caught him in the act was gone for help to hunt him down. He did not waste much time in wondering who that man could be, but he had a vague idea that it was Nelson.

He ran on, cunningly choosing a straightaway course to the south and making no detours for washes. He tried to estimate the time it would take to bring the sheriff on his trail. He should have brought a canteen — but there hadn't been time to think of preparing for flight. He was lucky to get away at all. That fellow had almost got his hands on him before he dreamed of his presence.

Well — Bill was dead. There would be no more snooping and spying from him. If he had known in time, he might have killed the other fellow too; Nelson, was it? He had always believed that Nelson

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minded his own business and would not interfere with his boss. Fine performance, coming down at night and sneaking around like a coyote! What was he after? In cahoots with Bill, perhaps. Maybe Nelson had reported him, had sent for Bill to come. That was probably the way it had happened; Nelson had sent for Bill, and Bill had purposely lamed himself so that they would be sure to take him in. A damnable trick to play on decent people. A mean, sneaking cur was Bill.

But Bill was dead. No man could live under the terrific blow he had dealt with that wrench; the heavy, sharp corners would crash through bone. — Marshall shivered involuntarily as he remembered the thud of that blow. But Bill deserved it; if there had been any other way, or if Bill had not been so utterly despicable, Marshall would never have dreamed of taking such a drastic course to protect himself. A spy takes those chances. He knows what he may expect from his outraged victims. Man must be a fool if he thinks he can act the part of a spy and walk safe and arrogant before the men who have trusted him and been betrayed. The mildest nature will revolt against treachery, and Bill had been an ungrateful, treacherous cur who was bound to reap one day what he had sown. Any jury in the country would agree that he had given one spy his just deserts. To come right into a man's family and beg for help, to be taken in and nursed and trusted, and then to repay the debt as he had done — a man like that should not be allowed to live!

Marshall Fights His Fight

Of course, with Bill dead in the bunk house there would be a hue and cry. It wasn't right, or just, but that was the fool law — that a man has no right to protect the integrity of his home and his own personal freedom. Like the prohibition law. An outrage against free-born citizens, a law no one should obey; better broken than kept. Fellows like Bill they hire to snoop and sneak around a man's home — and like Bill they get what they deserve, sometimes.

If they caught him, they'd call him a murderer. Funny, how a man rushes into things he never has dreamed of doing and being. A murderer! He would have expected as easily to be called a leper as a murderer. It wasn't in his nature, in his way of living. It wasn't just, to call out the sheriff and hunt him down merely because he had become so desperate he had taken matters into his own hands — an impulse of the moment, too. A man driven into a corner will turn and fight for his freedom — which is his honor. Any man will do that. It wasn't his fault that Bill had driven him to desperation.

But Bill was dead — now, back there in the bunk house. He was lying in a heap, his head smashed with that one blow. A heavy wrench; the head of it was covered with blood — the blood of a man he had killed. How easy to kill a man! One blow, with something heavy. — A man walks at the mercy of his fellows, at the pleasure of his enemies. One blow with a wrench and they can stretch him out dead, with his head smashed in. It was a wonder so few men were killed

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for their baseness; a wonder that so many men suffered treachery and wrong, hated and stayed their hands from giving the lethal blow. Why? Was he less forbearing than his fellows? What right had Nelson to go for the sheriff? To hunt him down like a criminal just because Bill was dead — back there in the bunk house — and there was blood on the wrench? Wasn't a man's freedom as dear to him as — as his wife? What was that verse — something about not loving thee so well, loved I not honor more. Well, a man's freedom is the same as his honor, and he had killed to protect his freedom. Same thing as protecting his wife. Same thing.

Only, his wife wouldn't think so. Henrietta had liked Bill. Probably she liked him better than she did her husband — women had no sense of loyalty beyond their desires. Maybe she'd uphold the law in hunting him down — would call him a murderer, even.

Marshall ran on, feeling terribly abused and sorry for himself and indignant with his wife and the sheriff — and with Bill, for deserving to be killed. Why couldn't Bill have behaved like a gentleman? Like the gentleman Marshall himself had always been, for instance. He bridled a bit, lifting his head and holding it proudly while he dwelt on the pleasing thought that he had shown himself a man of iron in the face of an emergency. That would surprise them! Folks had probably put him down as a weakling who couldn't stand up and deliver a blow for himself. Didn't think he had it in him, probably! The next spy would think

Marshall Fights His Fight

twice before he came snooping around as Bill had done. He'd think of what had happened to Bill, and he wouldn't be quite so ready to take over the job.

Marshall himself thought of Bill, and the first reaction of a perverted kind of pride in the deed became darkened with a growing horror at the details. In spite of himself he began to form an incredibly vivid picture of Bill Woods, lying in a distorted heap on the floor with his head shattered. He pictured the extent and appearance of the wound; he heard again and again the dull impact of the wrench, saw it gory and spattered in his hand when he drew it back from the window. He began to wipe his fingers down his trousers legs as he trotted through the sparse sage; a furtive movement obeying the persistent idea that his hands were smeared with Bill's blood. The blow struck in defence of his freedom began to lose a little of its glamor. The picture of Bill Woods lying dead in the bunk house became the impelling motive for flight, the injustice of being pursued by the sheriff fading to a dim, unformed dread of capture. He felt again the stark terror that had seized him when that strange man had reached out from behind and all but laid hands on him by the bunk house window.

He bettered his pace for a while, then dropped back to the shambling trot that was easier on his wind. In a deep wash he lay down for a while and rested, his head on his folded arms. Perhaps he dozed — certainly he dreamed; a sequence of past experiences that began away back in his school days and carried

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him forward scene by scene, to this final act, the dreadful sound of that blow delivered in the half-light of the young moon. He shivered and opened his eyes, turning his head instinctively to stare back along the way he had come.

So this was the end of everything, this flight into the desert with a dead man behind him, driving him on. He could not drug his conscience now with self-justifications — that terrible cinema of memory had relentlessly shown him scenes wherein he had been given the choice and had weakly chosen to indulge the desire of the moment; had stripped his soul of sophistry. The dead man he had pictured to himself smothered him under the weight of its accusation.

After a while he got up, stood hesitating. He had done a murder, he, Charles Marshall, who had once been a man whose character none might question. Should he go back and let them take him and hang him? He wept, and his tears were not altogether maudlin tears of self-pity. He was thinking of certain times in his past when he might have gone right, might have held his place among men. He could not go back. His wife — Joe — he could not go back and add that final scene to the burden of their disgrace. Enough that he had killed a man and had gone off and died in the desert. It could be said then that he was insane; they could gloss the facts; people would sympathize with them because of a great affliction visited upon him. No glossing things over for them, if he were caught and hanged.

Marshall Fights His Fight

He swung about and faced the desert, lying so quiet under the stars, with the quiet of invincibility. Away off there lay Death Valley, the very name carrying a sinister note of its own. He could walk that far, if he kept going. It would be better for Henrietta and for Joe if he could add that touch to his passing. Better than to have it said that he had died almost within hail of his own bed. A picturesque touch — also a touch of finality. Only let him walk far enough toward Death Valley, and the desert would take care of the rest of it! Especially since he had no water. If he could walk far enough before he lost his grip on this last decent impulse, he'd *have* to go through with it. He couldn't get back when his determination weakened and he would live at any price. The price would be too high, his endurance couldn't pay it.

Already he was thirsty. With the impulse of long habit he pulled the flask from his pocket, drew out the cork. But there he stopped as if a hand had stayed him. Whisky — it would rob him of the power to choose what he should do with the little time left of his life. Why couldn't he be decent at the very last? Wasn't it enough that the whisky had driven him to murder? Must he let it order his last few hours? How could he hope to walk into Death Valley if he let whisky cast the deciding vote? And if he should go stumbling back — drunk — maudlin —

He lifted the bottle high, sent it smashing down on a rock. The fumes rose mockingly from the liquor spilt in the sand, and he snarled and kicked at the wet

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spot until glass fragments and moisture were covered from sight. Then he glanced up into the star pageant, located the North Star with some difficulty, pressed his lips together in a grim line and started south, straight as might be for Death Valley.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE DESERT STILL HOPES TO WIN

"He's perking up," Bill announced, after what seemed an interminable plodding through sand with the limp body of a seventy-pound dog in his arms, the head grotesquely bandaged with his handkerchief. "Cheer up, Joe girl. He'll live to take many a call-down and track many a rabbit to its lair."

"I can't cheer up till we find daddy," Joe returned dispiritedly, and knelt beside Lobo, where Bill had laid him on the ground beside a bush that must be lighted. "It's almost morning and we haven't found him." She gathered Lobo's head into her lap, her fingers sliding with a caressing motion down along his neck. "If Lobo was all right he could help. I wish mother hadn't trained me to be so darn just and sensible. It would be some comfort if I could blame you for everything and hate you for it."

"Help yourself," Bill invited ironically, groping with his bare fingers for dried grasses that would burn easily at the touch of a match flame. "I have a few things in mind, but I can't very well mention them, except in self-defense; your driving Lobo off with kicks and ladylike curses, for instance, so that the poor brute was forced to manifest his loyalty by sneaking along behind in the shadows ——"

"That isn't true! You were too lazy to get out of the car and walk, so you wanted me to make the dog

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do it. What I should do right now is drive *you* home with kicks and curses that are *not* ladylike! A great big hulk like you, laying all the blame on me and the dog. And how do I know you didn't hurt daddy, your own self, there in the bunk house? It's all very well for you to come tagging along, but how do I know you didn't *plan* to shoot my dog so he couldn't find daddy for me in time? Probably," she went on furiously, rising upon her knees to lend emphasis to her hysterical denunciation, "probably you nearly killed daddy and *chased* him into the desert! And now you don't want me to find him if you can help it. And that," she finished wildly, "is why you shot — my — dog!"

Bill had the bush blazing, and now he stood up and looked at Joe, sobbing tearlessly with her face buried in Lobo's shoulder. The dog lifted his head, looked at Bill with his lip curled at one side, and began licking Joe's cheek to show how well he understood and sympathized. Bill had wanted to rouse her out of her apathy, but he hadn't counted on so sweeping a success as this.

"All right," he sneered half-heartedly, "since you know all about it, what are you going to do? Flunk the job, and make me carry you, as well as your dog? Or shall I call a taxi? This blaze won't last forever, you know."

"What do I care for the blaze? There are plenty more bushes," Joe retorted, after a considerable interval during which Bill stood looking down at her and biting his lip. He couldn't carry her, that much

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was certain, and it began to look as if he had hastened the collapse he had tried to avert. But there was spirit in her defiance, though she still lay with her head on the dog.

"Well, I'll go on, then." But he did not move. "Here's a match. I haven't many left, so one is all I can spare."

When Joe refused to stir or answer him, Bill stooped and placed a match in her hand. He saw her fingers close over it and snap it into pieces, and he swore under his breath. He had told the truth when he said he was almost out of matches. He waited, one eye on the firelight that was fading as swiftly as it had flared. When it was almost gone he searched and found a dry sage branch, pushed it into the heart of the small blaze that was left, and when the flame took hold he hurried on to another bush and thrust the brand beneath the shaggiest of the branches. He glanced uneasily back over his shoulder and sighed with exhaustion and an impotent anger that was more than half pity. Joe had not stirred; she and the dog lay just as he had left them, the two figures blended into one vague huddle beside the reddening branches of the bush that would presently be all black and leafless, a stark skeleton whipping bleakly in the wind.

He would have gone back, but the spitefulness of those fingers breaking the match and dropping the pieces on the ground chilled him and roused a certain stubbornness in himself. He shrugged his shoulders, found the footprints in the sand and went on with his

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lips drawn to a line. Let her sulk. She'd soon get over that tantrum if he left her alone, and she would be all right with the dog to look after her. Just now the important thing was to follow the footprints and find the man who had made them before all three reached the limit of their endurance, which Bill thought might well be rather near. Joe and the dog could come on, following the line of burned bushes. If the dog were not able to keep the trail Joe would find it easily enough. And as she had pointed out to him, the night was almost gone.

So he shambling on from bush to bush set burning. Pity they were over the ridge and out of sight from the ranch, he thought, for that moving line of fire would tell a tale of need to any eyes that glimpsed it. But the long slope hid them completely, and only the desolate borderland of Death Valley lay within view of their toilsome search.

It was with a distinct shock, for all his hours of expectancy, that Woods came so suddenly upon the prone form of Marshall that his foot actually struck against one sprawled leg. He was lying half on his face, as if he had fallen and lacked the will or the strength to move, though his forehead rested upon an arm. Bill hurried to a bent, dead yucca that would not prove too close for comfort, and fired its shaggy base, returning at a heavy trot to Marshall, the canteen plopping awkwardly against his back. He knelt, lifted the inert head and began to use what simple first aid might be had from a canteen half full of tepid water.

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Dawn came, pearl gray, then rose and crimson and violet, but Bill scarcely noticed it. He was down on both knees, wetting Marshall's handkerchief from the canteen and sopping the man's thin, gray hair and pinched face with its leaden pallor, when Joe came walking through the sage, Lobo with the handkerchief still bound rakishly around his head and closing one eye completely.

For a girl who had lately displayed all the makings of hysteria, Joe's behavior was singularly undramatic. She turned a shade paler and dropped beside her father, gathering his head into her arms with a maternal tenderness wholly and unconsciously feminine. She put out a hand for the wet handkerchief and pressed her lips upon her father's forehead before laying the handkerchief there. He was alive, breathing almost naturally, and that seemed to suffice for the present.

"I went to sleep, back there," she stated quietly after a space, turning her head to meet Bill's eyes. "You'd better take a nap while I watch daddy. You look about all in, and we've got our work cut out for us, I expect. I'll call you when he wakes up."

"Be careful of the water," Bill muttered. "There isn't more than a quart and it's got to see us to the truck."

"All right — but Lobo's got to have a drink. He's feverish from that bullet-hole. He can have my share. I'm — not a bit thirsty. Will you pour out a little water in my hat?"

Bill hesitated, lifting the canteen and shaking it.

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But the wistful look in the dog's eyes, the head cocked sidewise expectantly, weakened his resolution. He poured out a little water and stood by while the dog lapped it up thirstily. Bill held out the canteen to Joe.

"Better take a big drink now, before you begin to want it," he advised. "I did, just before you came up. It's the best way to stave off thirst later on — keep your system satisfied longer."

Joe looked doubtful, but Bill had a specious explanation and she drank what she wanted, convinced that she would thereby need less later on. Bill swallowed and turned away, satisfied with his lie. If Marshall recovered sufficiently to walk to the truck they would suffer no more than a certain amount of discomfort. He would have shot a rabbit and broiled it for their breakfast, but there didn't seem to be any rabbits; nothing but lizards, and they had not yet reached the point of resorting to such fare. He lay down in the sand, pulled his hat over his eyes and slept.

He awoke with a confused sense of misfortune, and with the strident voice of a man hammering at his consciousness. For a minute or two he failed to identify that voice or his surroundings, but presently a reiterated phrase or two brought him back to the present and he sat up.

"I don't *want* to live, I tell you. I came out here to die and be done with it, and I'm going to die in spite of you. It's all I can do, now. I'm a miserable wreck of a man. I won't wreck my family. You can leave the desert and all it stands for — me along with it. A

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hateful place — a barren, God-forsaken world, fit for a drunkard and a murderer to die in. Better than hanging. Why did you bring me back to life? I was dead, I tell you. I drove myself on and on — and then I dropped. I was almost through with it. I'd have been too dead to come back, in another hour. Then it would have been all right and you could have mourned decently for a little while, and then forget me. Take that damned cloth away! You're only dragging out the finish, I tell you. My God, can't a man die when he wants to? Go home, Josephine. I don't want you here. This is something I have to do — I *want* to do. I — I insist that you obey me. Go to your mother ——”

“Not without you, daddy. The truck isn't far away, and — and when you're rested and all, you'll feel a lot different.” She glanced up as Bill approached, and her eyes were dark and deep and sorrowful. “He'll be all right in a little bit,” she said bravely. “He isn't quite ——”

A groan from Marshall stopped her. He was staring at Bill with a great horror in his face, and as Bill walked closer, he made a convulsive effort to free himself from Joe's arms, struggled to his feet and ran staggeringly away from them.

They overtook him, stopped him by force and he slumped down again in the sand, his face hidden. Joe gave him an impatient shake, much as she would a child.

“For pity's sake, dad Marshall, have some sense!

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I know what would happen if I acted like this — and — Dad! You've simply got to buck up and go home. Mother is simply *wild*. She and Barby have been tearing all over the country in the car, looking for you. You haven't hurt Bill, you see. You're not a — you haven't done anything to make such a fuss over, and as for hanging, that's all foolishness and you know it. I hate to say it, dad, but I think you're just simply off your head from drinking. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, talking like that about dying out here. You're going home in the truck, and no more nonsense."

Marshall looked up bleakly into her face.

"I'm not drunk. If I lived to be a hundred I'd never touch it again. It's pretty late in the day to swear off ——" He looked around, at the desert all smiling under the morning sun. "It's as good a place as any for the final act," he said stubbornly. "Go on and let me alone. Tell your mother I'm crazy. Tell her it was too late when you found me." His voice still had the strident, rasping note that had affected Bill so unpleasantly when he woke; weak, yet stubborn beyond the reach of argument; harsh, yet full of a gentleness that would not yield.

Joe stared down at him in some perplexity, the corners of her mouth drooping as though she wanted to cry — would, when the present crisis was safely passed. She had never seen her father in just this mood, and she was obliged to grope her way through his obsession to his reason.

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"If you've made up your mind to stop drinking, daddy, there won't be anything more to worry us in this world. And you know it's all nonsense to talk about murdering Bill. You can see him standing right there without a scratch on him."

"No matter," her father insisted dully. "I killed a man. With a wrench. Slipped up ——"

"You did *not*! Don't you suppose I know?" She drew in her breath as if she had about reached the limit of her patience. "I'm ashamed of you! Here, take a drink of water and come on with us to the truck. It isn't far, and we'll help you, daddy. Come on, there's a good old dad." Her fingers were busy, unscrewing the canteen top. She held out the canteen toward him ingratiatingly. "Drink a lot, dad. There's plenty at the truck."

It seemed at first as though Marshall would refuse to touch the canteen. Then he took it, an odd, half-crazy light in his eyes.

"Good girl — Joe," he muttered. "Too bad you couldn't have — decent father." He looked at her, the canteen tilted in his hands, the water streaming from its mouth to the greedy sand.

"Look out," Bill cried hoarsely, because of the parched feeling in his throat. "You're spilling it!" He started forward, but Marshall gave a shrill laugh and flung the canteen mouth downward into the farthest bush his strength would reach.

"A man's got a right to die if he wants to," he cried, his burning eyes on Joe. "Made up my mind

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— only decent thing to do. Go home to your mother. Tell her — tell your mother Charles did one decent thing. Future's before you — clean."

Bill came back with the canteen, and his face was grim, a disgusted look in his eyes when they turned to Marshall lying slack in the sand, one arm flung up over his face.

"We ought to leave you here," he gritted, "and let you do your martyr stuff." He looked at Joe and crowding back another biting sentence, made shift to smile down into her pinched face. "We've just naturally *got* to hike back to the car, now," he said. "I'll hold you up so you can maybe spot it and save back-trailing." He caught her by the knees and hoisted her in his arms, paying no attention to Marshall, who was like a dead man at his feet.

"I can't see it," Joe confessed reluctantly after a long minute. "We stopped in a wash, you know."

She slid down through Bill's arms and stood staring at her father, Bill's hand on her shoulder. He could feel the tremor under his hand, as if her flesh was protesting dumbly against the hard usage of the past twenty-four hours. She was so little and slim and young, Bill thought, to bear so great a burden; yet bear it she did, with a brave assumption of casual solicitude and nothing more. But Bill was not fooled. He patted her shoulder hearteningly.

"Well," he remarked as cheerfully as he could, "we'd better break camp, since we can't whistle the car up to us. Maybe the dog can take us by a short

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cut. You might speak to him about it while I get your father on his feet. And don't worry over moods, little girl. They'll pass and everything will be fine when we get headed toward home."

She did not answer, and Bill turned his attention to Marshall, shaking and calling and getting no response. Marshall had lapsed into a stupor which nothing seemed to break, wherefore Bill heaved him up, managed to pull his arms forward across Bill's shoulders and staggered off in the direction Joe and Lobo were taking. Lobo, he observed, was walking steadily, pulling at the leash. He hoped the dog knew where he was going. If not, if they were walking blindly, they would have to retrace the line of burned bushes. Bill did not like to think of that. He grinned sardonically when he thought how he had considered it impossible to carry Joe. A man never knew until he tried, until he was pushed to it. Joe looked often over her shoulder as if she, too, were measuring the quality of Bill's endurance; when he caught her glance Bill would stretch his lips in what purported to be a cheerful grin and would force himself to a steady gait.

The milk was sour, clabbered thick as cheese in the bottle. They broke the neck off the bottle with a rock and tried to force a little of the stuff between Marshall's set teeth, and failed. So Bill and Joe divided the clabber with meticulous impartiality, using the canteen top for a spoon. The milk refreshed them wonderfully, made it possible to go on.

Bill's mind was divided between two questions that

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asked themselves over and over until even his incredulous denial of one and his determination in answering the other with proof reeled together in a drunken dance, while reason played the fiddle and mowed and mocked at the two. Could it be possible that they three were to die out here of thirst and exhaustion, in spite of all reason? Was fate meaning to collect a Shylockian payment for one man's sins and another man's human limitations? At first he said no and believed it. Later, he was not so sure. The second question was whether he were man enough, whether the fiber of his soul was strong enough to carry Marshall to the truck. For a long while he stoutly declared that he could carry Marshall to the ranch, if necessary. After a while he was not so sure; later he was pushed to the point of saying yes to the first question, no to the second; which did not make his grin more convincing.

Came a time when he would not stop to rest, because he knew that if he laid Marshall on the ground one more time he could never get him hoisted to his shoulders again, even with Joe's help. Joe, he observed, was staggering a bit, though she kept on steadily, the leash taut to Lobo's collar. Bill was glad she had brought the leash with her from the truck; it helped her now, with Lobo pulling against it.

"Want to rest?" Joe's voice was an odd croak.

"No. Keep going." One foot down, the other foot lifted and moved ahead. Every time he did that he advanced a certain distance. Enough of such advances

The Desert Still Hopes to Win

would carry him through. Had he sounded abrupt? He had not meant it — but the breath and energy used in one sentence might carry him two or three steps, and talking dried the mouth and throat. Marshall wasn't dead. He could feel his heart beat. Lobo was helping Joe, taking half the labor off walking. It was better than when Bill held her hand and helped her along; the pull was stronger. Good thing that wind had blown up a bank of clouds. That might save their lives — that and the sour milk. They could not have gone on under a blazing sun. It couldn't be far to the truck. One foot up and forward — how many to a mile? Bill tried to figure it out in his head and found that his head refused to work on so futile a problem. The next step was all that mattered, after all. If he kept on taking that next step, he'd win, and if he didn't they would probably all die of thirst, since Joe would never leave her father. No use counting his steps; the only thing he had to do was keep going. The dry lake lay behind them; they couldn't have circled, after all, during the night. They must have continued straight toward the dry lake. It was the wind that had changed, not the footprints.

Mountains rose before them, a muddy blue in the distance. Bill went doggedly on, putting one foot before the other, his fingers numb with their grip on Marshall's wrists. Funny about those mountains. The whole thing was funny. They had been half out of sight of the mountains long before they left the truck. Mirage, probably. The desert plays tricks with

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a man, once it gets him out away from help. Well, he was fooling the desert too. He was still walking with Marshall on his back. He wouldn't have believed a man could do what he was doing. Put them in a story — he'd have typed their horrible death long ago. Funny how a man will hang on to life!

Joe sent a queer, dismayed look over her shoulder while Lobo forged ahead with renewed energy, pulling her forward.

“Bill!” Her voice was tragic. “He never started for the truck, at all! He's headed — home!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"BUT BILL'S JUST HERE TO ENJOY HIMSELF!"

CARTER, the prospector with the expensive cigarettes, heard a dog barking, away off somewhere in the sage. "Wooh! Wooh!" A wait, and then again, "Wooh! Wooh! Wooh!"

He slowed, killed the engine that he might catch any other sound in the direction of the barking, and listened. In the windy dusk the sound was weird, full of a boding melancholy.

"Funny thing," he said half aloud. "I'll swear that's the truck, away ahead there down the slope. These glasses don't lie, and that barking is behind me and away off to the left, I should say." He stood up, leaning out of the car, and peered out across the scraggy growth of sage and greasewood.

"Wooh! Wooh!" Then an indescribable, long-drawn howl.

"Better take the dog's word for it," Carter decided, after a long period of hesitation while his eyes argued with his ears. "Broke down, maybe, and are trying to walk back. But you'd think they'd follow the truck trail, at that."

Carter's shrewd eyes appraised the little group as he drove up, lurching over hummocks and brush roots without much regard for tires or springs; Joe, sitting with her father's head in her lap, watched apathetically

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his approach, but Bill lay sprawled in the sand with his face pillowed on his folded arms where he had finally gone down.

"Well! Pretty well used up, eh? Mrs. Marshall was afraid something might have happened to you, so I came out to locate the trouble. My name is Carter. Where's the truck? Broke down?"

"Give Bill a drink," Joe said hoarsely. "He's been carrying dad all day."

"Out of water, eh?" Carter looked at her curiously while he climbed out with a canteen in his hands. "Ladies first — then Bill can drink all he wants."

But Joe waved the canteen away impatiently, her pinched face hard under the big hat.

"Look after Bill first. Dad and I can wait. We had it easier than he did. Go on."

Carter gave her another searching look, dropped the canteen close beside her and got another from the car.

"Looking after Bill may take a little time," he observed drily. "There's enough to go around."

From the corner of his eye he watched Joe slosh water over her dad's head and face before she lifted the canteen to her own lips. A game kid, he thought approvingly, and shook his head at an unpleasant thought that edged into the front of his mind.

"I brought grub along too," he said to Joe, when he had got Bill on his back and was pulling him out of the torpor into which he had fallen. "Better bring it from the car — or wait a minute and I'll get it. I

“Just Here to Enjoy Himself!”

know just where it is. Didn't know how long I might be out, and the ladies said you didn't take anything much in the way of supplies. Here it is — fresh milk, hard-boiled eggs and bread. That will stay you till I get time to boil a pot of coffee. I'd give your father a little milk, if he can take it, and you eat the solid food yourself, little girl. This long individual will be up and eating in a mighty short while, now. But save room for a cup of coffee. That will set you up better than anything.”

Blunted with fatigue, Joe was dully astonished that she could do no more than nibble at the food. Her father opened his eyes, consented to swallow a little milk, and mumbled an unintelligible sentence or two which Joe was thankful this strange man could not understand.

Bill sat up and stared groggily at Joe and at the boiled egg she was languidly peeling, looked at the Ford, at Carter, at Marshall.

“Saved, old dear,” Joe muttered whimsically, when Bill's bloodshot eyes came back to her and the egg.

“Bring a blanket in the fall — so — won't catch — cold,” Bill mumbled, and lay down again and closed his eyes.

“We walked all last night and all to-day and part of yesterday,” Joe explained apologetically. “And to-day Bill had to carry dad. He's tired.”

“I reckon he is,” Carter agreed, and began gathering brush for a small camp fire. “Nothing like coffee to set a man on his feet.”

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Joe watched him pottering about the fire, making countless trips to the Ford and always returning with something that would add to their well-being. When the fire was going and coffee in the sooty bucket he used for the purpose, Carter came and knelt beside her, feeling Marshall's pulse with quiet finger-tips that seemed to know their business. She watched Carter's face and could read nothing from his downcast eyes and the lips twisted to one side in a humorous half-smile. He seemed an ideal rescuer, she thought, and wondered who and what he was.

"Heart's going along all right," he announced with a swift look into Joe's face. "Exhaustion is all that ails him and our long friend, Bill. Don't go to sleep if you can help it, little girl. We'll have supper and then we'll drive back and you can go right to bed. Bill," he added with an amused side glance, "was over the edge already. I'll have a time waking him up for supper, I expect."

Joe stared back across the desert, softening now as the shadows deepened. The hills that held Death Valley so jealously close were very beautiful, she thought. Terrible, too, when one knew just what they were capable of doing. Carter did not seem to know that they had reached the end of their strength and that he had saved their lives. He did not seem to think it was anything much — nothing to make a fuss over. He could laugh at Bill! Carter simply did not know what it was like.

"It's only about ten or twelve miles to the ranch,"

“Just Here to Enjoy Himself!”

he observed casually, as if he had read her thought. “But I’ve got the habit of stopping and boiling my coffee wherever I happen to think of it. No use waiting.”

“Ten miles or ten hundred,” said Joe resentfully, “we never would have made it. We couldn’t have gone a mile.”

“Well,” Carter twisted his mouth in that funny smile of his, “you think you couldn’t have, now it’s over. But you could. A person never knows until he has to do it.”

Joe’s lips parted, but she closed them tightly. Why argue the point? They had looked death in the eye that day — but what use was there in telling Carter? Let him think what he pleased and laugh at Bill if he liked, and say that her dad was only tired out. She silently called him a dumb-bell, which proved that Joe was rapidly winning back to normal.

After that, coffee was ready, and Bill was dragged out of slumber a million miles deep and made to drink a cup of coffee; whereupon he drank two more of his own accord and decided that he would not sleep out there until fall, but go in with the others to the ranch. Marshall they had to lift into the car, but beyond that not even the anxious-eyed Mrs. Marshall saw more than the ordinary effect of being stranded in the desert for a time. But Bill knew, and so did Joe, how nearly the desert had beaten them.

“Feeling pretty peart again, are you?” Carter asked

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of Bill, when that sore-muscled young man walked stiffly to the door of the bunk house after about twenty hours in bed. Carter was sitting on the bench beside the doorway, smoking his expensive cigarettes and looking, Bill thought, as if he were waiting for something or some one. It's hard to describe that quiescent attitude of watchfulness, but nevertheless a man's sixth sense usually detects it unerringly. Bill mentally threw up his guard.

"You couldn't inveigle me into any kind of a foot race," he yawned after a pause. "Maybe, in five or ten years, I may feel like taking a walk."

Carter twisted his lips to one side, cocked an eye up at Bill leaning against the door casing and gave a dry chuckle.

"Thought you'd stay put to-day, anyway. The little girl has been up for a couple of hours."

"Oh — Joe. Well, she's younger than I am." Bill outdid old Hank in letting himself down carefully to the doorstep, and he heaved a long sigh of relief when he was settled.

"How about that truck you drove into the desert?" Carter sent a quick, sidelong glance at Bill.

"How about it?" Bill was busy sifting tobacco from a can into his old briar pipe, and he did not look up. "Why, it'll stand hitched, I reckon, until I go out and bring it in. About to-morrow I'll go after it." He drew a matchhead sharply across a board and held the flame to his pipe. Carter saw his eyelids flicker and thought he was blinking at the smoke.

“Just Here to Enjoy Himself!”

“You didn’t run out of gas, did you?”

“Something like that,” drawled Bill laconically, smoking with half-closed eyes and the look of a man still half asleep. But the mind back of that masklike face of his was furiously at work.

“You know, I got this man who lives on the other end of the ranch — Nelson, I think his name is — and we went out and brought the truck in, early this morning.” Carter held up his cigarette, squinted at it thoughtfully and wiped off a gray collar of ash.

“Fine,” drawled Bill, after a minute. “That lets me out.”

“Or in,” Carter amended softly.

“Or in — luck. I wasn’t hankering for the trip.”

“Funny you ran out of gas — the way you did,” purred Carter.

“Ha-ha-ha,” said Bill unemotionally. “I chortle with glee.”

Carter pursed his lips, eyeing Bill unobtrusively.

“Feel like walking down to the garage with me?”

A note of insistence crept into Carter’s purring voice.

“Putting it that way, no, I don’t. I don’t feel like walking anywhere,” said Bill with conviction.

“But you *will* walk down there with me, won’t you?” The purr was leaving Carter’s voice now and the insistence dominated quite frankly.

“Do you think I ought to be taken out and walked around for exercise?” Bill gave him a straight stare that could be interpreted as Carter chose.

Carter’s lips pursed with brief amusement.

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"That time will come, no doubt, but I wasn't thinking of exercise. I just wanted to show you something, Bill."

"I can't think of a thing worth walking ten rods to see," sighed Bill, packing down the tobacco in his pipe. "But I'd rather go than sit here and argue about going. It'll take a lot to rouse any enthusiasm in me this evening, though." He got up slowly, as if he could hear his joints creak, and went with Carter to the garage.

"You see," Carter explained silkily, when they neared the truck, backed into its place alongside the little building, "I like to be open and aboveboard whenever it's possible." He took Bill by the arm and piloted him to that side of the truck which held the big, red canteen on the running board. "I'd like to have you open that canteen, if you please, and examine the contents."

Bill looked at him.

"You don't want me to lift it, do you?" he inquired apprehensively. "Carter, it's all I want to do to lift a knifeful of soft-boiled egg! That's how crazy I am to take up the white man's burden."

"Open it," said Carter shortly. "See what's in it."

"Oh." Bill sounded relieved. "If I don't have to stoop over to do it." His long fingers fumbled languidly the screw top while his brain circled dizzily around Carter's inexplicable change of manner. He canted an eye toward the open canteen.

"That all? What's the joke?"

“Just Here to Enjoy Himself!”

“What’s in that canteen, Bill?”

“Why — gas,” Bill responded blandly.

“Gas! Smell it!”

Bill hated to bend, so he thrust in his finger as he had done on other well-remembered occasions, withdrew it wet and held it under his nose.

“Gas,” he drawled mildly, though he blinked.

“Gas? Forget it!” snapped Carter, his lips tightening.

“I can’t,” Bill objected pensively. “I drank some once. I never will forget it.”

Carter grinned a straight, sardonic grin without the humorous twist.

“It’s the kind of gas a good many men drink.”

“Yes?” Bill lifted his eyebrows in surprise. He shook his head. “Damn fools, if they say they like it.”

“This isn’t getting you anything.” Carter gave Bill a hard look, thrust his own finger into the canteen and sniffed. His eyes opened slowly, staring resentfully at Bill. “Where’s the moonshine that was in that canteen?”

“I dunno.” Bill shook his head with a helpless gesture. “The moon ain’t up yet.”

“Well, be as funny as you like.” Carter’s jaw squared. “You’re under arrest, from now on. How you got away with that booze I don’t know — yet. You’d have done better if you’d left it alone, I’ll tell you now. Here. We’ll hang the decorations on you, since you’re so clever.” New and shiny handcuffs slid with an implacable suddenness upon Bill’s wrists. “I’d

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have sworn you never left the bunk house to-day, and Marshall I know is out of the game at present. Here's the warrant for your arrest. You may as well read it."

"Well, if that isn't the *dumbest* thing to do!" Joe, coming from the stable with her hat full of eggs and her dog at her heels, halted beside them and stared furiously from Carter's grim face to the handcuffs. "You're exceeding the speed limit, Mr. Carter, arresting Bill. I don't suppose you know who he is!"

"Don't I?" Carter pursed his lips.

"No, you don't. He's — well, he's really Woods Morgan. He writes books, and he's a poet. Mother has some of the books he wrote. He's — well, he's just out here enjoying himself!"

Bill's lips twitched.

"Mother doesn't dream who he is, nor dad nor Barb — well, Barb knows. She can tell you herself that I found his typewriter and stuff, where he'd started a lovely sunset before ever he came here at all."

"Yes — but you see, little girl, I'm not arresting him for writing poetry — though he's liable to hang for it some day. But this is bootlegging. Now you'd better run along in to your mother and don't worry about Bill."

"Bootlegging?" Joe stood perfectly still and stared at Carter with wide-open eyes. "Which boot?" She stamped a foot. "If you want to get rid of me, you'd better tell me," she stated with ominous calm.

"I s'pose. Well, Bill started out across the desert

“Just Here to Enjoy Himself!”

with his blankets and five gallons of whisky. That canteen, there, was full of it.”

“Was? I never saw him drink it.”

“It was there when I drove the truck in, about noon.” He gave Bill a resentful glance.

Joe went forward like any other curious child and sniffed at the open canteen, dipping her small finger in just as the men had done. She raised her head and looked at Carter with frank disdain.

“Why, that isn’t whisky, stupid. That’s gasoline.”

“Didn’t you know Bill had whisky along when he took you out there into the desert?” Carter eyed her sharply. “You must be old enough to know ——”

“I know I started out to find daddy, with my dog. And Bill came after me with the truck, to haul daddy back. And then when we got stuck in that wash, we started on afoot, and found daddy, and Bill was carrying him home on his back. I don’t see what he’d want whisky for, Mr. Carter. Bill’s quite a nice man when you know how to take him.”

Carter laughed shortly.

“I know how to take him, all right. Now run along in to your mother before you break all those eggs.” He looked at Bill and jerked his head toward the bunk house. “You can go back and take a nice long sleep,” he purred. “I’ll tie you so you can’t fall out of bed.” Bill moved toward the bunk house, his shackled hands held somewhat awkwardly before him.

Ahead of them, Joe was walking up the path with her hatful of eggs in the crook of her arm, singing as

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she went. And the burden of her song was, "*Yes-s!*
We got no-o bananas!"

Bill looked after her and again his lips twitched a bit.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

JOE DOES HER BEST

“AND she says I’m just here to enjoy myself,” mused Bill aloud, regarding his manacled hands with a certain grim humor. “You know, Carter, I can’t quite get your point of view. I’d take it as a natural, human mistake if you had grabbed me for murder, with all that bloody evidence on the bed and floor — which I see you’ve covered up. Something surely took place here the other night while I was off somewhere else. For a while I thought you had wandered in here and were the victim of an assassin. Since you turned up all right, I must confess I’m all up in the air. If it’s really bootlegging you think you want me for, why the handcuffs? I didn’t suppose peddling booze was that desperate a crime.”

Carter, lounging on the opposite bed, over which he had spread his own blankets, pursed his lips.

“Bootlegging, as such, is sometimes desperate; more often not. But I’ll tell you, my long friend, that any man who could slip out from under my nose the way you did to-day, and destroy the evidence as you did, needs leg irons as well as handcuffs. You’re a smooth *hombre*, I don’t mind saying to your face. I’d have sworn you stayed on that bed from the time the women packed grub to you at noon till you came out the door a while ago. I ought to have stayed inside and kept one eye on you, instead of lying out in the shade with

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one eye on the door. What did you do — go through the window?"

"Well," Bill deliberated, "if I did it wouldn't be the first time."

"I ought to have thought of that. But you pulled that all-in stuff so realistic I fell for it. I'm telling you, Bill, so you'll know I ain't liable to fall for the next stunt." He selected a smoke from the package of cigarettes on the window sill, and felt for a match. "I'm sorry now I kept that little find to myself, out there. Wasn't quite sure of Nelson — but I know he didn't get away with the booze. I made sure that he went on home before I left the truck. I'm satisfied that he didn't know it was there."

"I'm listening to all that with bated breath — and I would like to spell it b-a-i-t. But what about the — er — whatever took place in here? I don't give a damn for the booze, but what about that blood?"

"Oh, that?" Carter turned down a corner of his blankets and glanced carelessly at the print of bloody fingers on the pillow. "That's no mystery, whatever. A little mistake. Our gentle boss, Charley Marshall, just about scalped old Hank Hawkins. I think he was after you, my long friend. I'd have been out there after you much sooner if I hadn't thought it best to take Hank Hawkins in while I had the chance. He needed some stitches; six — or seven, I forget which." He squinted across, studying Bill's face which did not tell him anything at all. "I may as well tell you that Hank came clean."

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"He did?" Bill looked up and grinned joyously. "I'll bet the old devil hollered like a whipped pup when the water touched him. What did you use? Condensed lye?"

Carter grunted and settled back against the head of the bed with his eyes half shut.

"No," he retorted, "they found out you had about all there is in the country."

Bill grinned again, vouchsafing no reply to that thrust.

"Sorry I can't hold you for murder, Bill. It'd please me to death. But corpses are scarce this year."

"I don't know," Bill drawled maliciously. "I've planted a good many dead men around here and there in the desert. You might be able to dig up some evidence — if you could hang on to it."

Carter swore softly.

"I'll find out where that whisky went, don't worry about that. And it isn't going to make things any easier for you when I do."

"I'm quite comfortable, thank you. You may have to cut my butter for me, but I can pick a chicken wing and eat corn on the half shell, and for once in my sad life I can take a piece of pie up in both hands without feeling ashamed of myself. If they have pie for supper." He sighed wishfully. "And so old Hank inadvertently took a bath! Well, well!"

"Not so well-well for you, young man. Hank took it for granted it was you that tried to kill him. I

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never saw an old man any fuller of spite. In getting some of it talked out of his system, he spilled enough evidence to settle your hash for some time to come. He tried to protect Marshall, but he made up for it by giving up the whole works, so far as you are concerned. I don't need that canteen evidence so bad — you're cinched tight without that, with what Hank spilled on the way to town."

"I always did say most men wear whiskers to hide a mean mouth," Bill sighed. "Hank goes to prove I'm right."

Barby and Joe arrived then with Bill's supper and the word-sparring was suspended for a time, neither man feeling that he had gained much by the verbal thrust and parry; certainly not Carter, who had hoped to goad Bill into making some incriminating statement.

Barby gave Bill a look that warmed his heart, and sent a blasting glance toward Carter.

"Joe told me all about this outrageous performance," she said bitingly. "Fortunately, my aunt is spending all of her time with Uncle Charley, so she doesn't know about it. We don't want her to know, and so you'll have to keep Bill in the bunk house and we'll bring his meals to him if you're going to be silly enough to go on thinking he's a criminal, and keep those horrible handcuffs on him. If Auntie comes to see you, Bill, can't you hide them some way? She's worried about sick over Uncle Charley, and Joe and I don't want her to know there's any trouble over

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whisky. Of course, you're innocent, and Mr. Carter probably planted some himself, just to frame up a case. I've heard that they do that, right along. In Los Angeles the police are simply frightful that way. Little Joe says you didn't have any whisky at all, when you went after Uncle Charley. Did you?"

"Not a drop," Bill assured her solemnly.

"We thought that big canteen was full of gas — and it is," Joe put in, her eyes round and childlike in their innocence. "I got the car stuck in a wash, and the front tire kept going flat, so we thought we could make better time on foot. That's the truth, Barby. It's a perfect washout, trying to pretend Bill hauled out whisky in a gas canteen. Why, it wouldn't be fit to drink, if he did! I never heard of anything so dumb. Did you, Barby?"

Barby shook her head and poured Bill's coffee, adding whipped cream and sugar lavishly, though Bill would have preferred his coffee black.

"Oh, well, some men are like that. It would kill a detective to think, I suppose. They seem to be afraid to try it, anyway. We had better be careful or he'll say *we* are bootleggers, ourselves!"

"I've heard of queerer things than that," Carter observed grimly. "How old are you, Joe?"

"Me?" Joe looked at him surprised. Then she clapped her hands together softly and gave Barby a triumphant little laugh. "How old shall I say, Barb? Can I get away with an extra — do you mean you'll let me be a queen of the bootlegging gang, and get

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my name in the paper, and everything? I'm as much of one as Bill is. Er — how old do I need to be, Mr. Carter?"

Carter impatiently drove a small smoke-cloud away from before his face and looked at Joe with a steadfastness that should have made her squirm.

"What grade are you in, at school?"

"Well" — Joe frowned and bit her lips, "I've passed the seventh, all right, but I was conditioned in arithmetic and language. You can't tell a thing by the grade," she added eagerly. "I'm just *dumb* — for my age, and I'm a ——" she shook back her hair and gave Barby what was intended to be a secret nudge. "I'm eighteen years old!"

"Yes?" Carter gave his twisted smile, and a twinkle was in his eyes. "Wel-l, I've always been taught not to contradict a woman when she gives her age, but it seems to me they start juggling pretty young in these parts. Some day you'll want to knock off about as many as you're adding now. Eighteen — h-mm. Pretty nearly old enough to marry Bill when he gets out of jail. You like Bill pretty well, don't you, little girl?"

Joe flushed hotly, but confusion could not reach her tongue.

"And Barby wearing that headlight diamond Bill gave her? I guess you aren't always such a good guesser, Mr. Carter. I expect to hunt up a hero of my own when I grow — er — when I get ready."

Carter's eyes went to Barby's left hand, which trem-

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bled a bit under his gaze. Joe's eyes went to Bill's blank face, her eyebrows pinched together warningly. Carter looked at Joe and he laughed lazily.

"Careful, little girl. Those last four years kind of skidded for a minute, didn't they? First thing you know, you'll be talking exactly like the little fourteen-year-old you really are!" His glance went to Bill. "Poetry must bring a pretty good price, to pay for a ring like that," he said ironically. "I must apologize to Miss Barby for the humiliation of the handcuffs. I rather think, after all, that you won't try to break away, under the circumstances. If you'll explain why William Woods Morgan is passing himself off as Bill Woods when he's engaged to this young woman here, and is on a visit to her ——"

"Why, you're awfully dumb if you can't see that this is a romance," Joe interrupted him headlong. "Why, mother doesn't *dream* they're engaged! She thinks Barby is going to marry another young man that's got scads of money and oil wells, and can put it all over a mere author as a rich husband. So, Bill — well, it's frightfully darling of him, don't you think, to give Barby a ring like that, and come here ——"

"H-m. I thought you found Bill's typewriter ——"

"Why, dumb-bell, that's the *ro*-mance!" Joe wailed in a tone of intense exasperation at his blindness. "Barby *didn't* know who he was, at first. But" — spreading her hands in eloquent disdain of further explanation, — "you know what love is." She flung an arm around Barby's shoulder defensively. "And you

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needn't think Barb is such a dud she'd take up with a bootlegger, either."

"Not if she knew it, I'm sure." He reached slowly into his pocket, as if he were yielding to a sentiment of which he was half ashamed, and drew out a key. "I may not know what love is, but I'll be as romantic as anybody and take a chance. Miss Barby — and Joe, you listen to me — I'm going to trust to your honor and your regard for Bill's welfare, and take off these handcuffs. But first I want you both to thoroughly understand that trying to get away from me would be the most foolish thing he could possibly do. My duty as a federal officer would make it necessary for me to shoot your friend Bill. I'm sure you wouldn't want that to happen. He will get absolute justice, I assure you, and if he is innocent he should have no trouble in proving it and this will be merely an adventure added to your romance. I shall have to shackle him at night, but I can leave him free during the day if you will promise not to encourage or help him to escape. Do you promise that?"

"Certainly," said Barby stiffly, staring down at Bill's plate, where his supper remained untouched.

"Joe — honor bright, little girl! No fibbing — this isn't a matter of age."

Lips pressed firmly together, Joe nodded her front hair into her eyes and drew an invisible cross over her midddy pocket.

"Cross my heart an' hope to die," she mumbled rapidly. "Oh, Mr. Carter, I think it will be the gi-

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raffe's ear muffs to have Bill for a prisoner, if you are going to be human about it. Maybe this will be an inspiration to him. Bill, I'll disgorge your typewriter and Woods Morgan paper if you'll try and think up a bootlegger story to go with that perfectly marvellous sunset!"

"She says she was conditioned in language," murmured Bill, eyeing Barby sidelong. "Jerusalem, what if she had been perfect!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“HAS HE SAID ANYTHING ABOUT DADDY?”

SAFELY handcuffed with his right wrist to the bedstead, Bill managed his pipe with his left hand and meditated upon the many angles to the situation in which he found himself. He was surprised and secretly a bit gratified at the thrill he had known when Barby's name was so daringly linked with his own, and he found himself dwelling upon her blushes, in spite of his good sense and his pet theory that no man is better than a slave who is not master of his emotions. Joe he wanted to shake — and yet he had to thank her for startling Barby out of her calm. It was a purposeless kind of evasion which Joe had perpetrated and beyond freeing him from the handcuffs for a part of the time he could not see what could possibly be gained by it. Carter would no doubt haul him to some town, where Bill would send some telegrams and do a little wire-pulling and get himself out of the scrape —

“Ss-shush, fair captive, and listen,” the voice of the irrepressible Joe murmured at the window beside him. “Yon tyrant eateth unsuspectingly of fried chicken in the castle, and what are you going to do about this funny bootlegging charge, Bill? Let him go ahead and think you are one?”

Bill slid the steel circle along the top rod until it was stopped by an upright brace, and did a simple contortion act that brought him facing the window.

“Has He Said Anything?”

“Old stuff, talking through the window, Joe. Hank did that up on the mountain — and that’s one thing I’m anxious to understand. Be careful you don’t get caught at it, kid. I’m afraid friend Carter might suspect you of other things not so guileless.”

“I know.” Joe was sober enough now. “I’ve stirred things up considerably, haven’t I, Bill? Now, if the darn thing will jell the way I want it to, I think you can wriggle out of it.”

“Clear as Puget Sound fog. Did you doctor that canteen, Joe? Of course you did, though. Bright trick — until he finds the whisky.”

“I don’t see how he can,” said Joe. “I poured it all out into a coal-oil can and filled up the canteen with gas. And then I packed the whisky down to the ditch and poured it in the water. Do you suppose it will smell up the meadow?”

Bill grinned and shook his head.

“Of course I wouldn’t put that tube back in, for him to find and make matters look all the worse. I’m not quite that dumb, I hope. Bill” — she hesitated — “has he said anything about daddy?”

“That’s what worries me, Joe. He hasn’t. Old Hank was the one who got rapped on the head, and he thinks I did it, so he told a lot of stuff about me and kind of let your father out of it, I think. But, kid, there’s more to it than finding that canteen on the running board. No federal agent bothers with small stuff like that, you know. There’s a lot we don’t know about, I’m afraid; and that’s why I daren’t say a word,

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I don't want to let your dad in for anything, and Carter's been nagging and fishing for something he thinks I know."

"About daddy getting whisky right along?"

"I don't know. I think it's something more than that, kid."

"I don't see what it could be." Joe shook her head. "Daddy's better, but I'm afraid to say anything to him. For one thing, there's mother always around close — and besides, daddy's got something on his mind and he won't talk at all, hardly. You know — what he was going to do out there in the desert, Bill. It would kill mother to know about that. If he were to be mixed up now with this horrible officer, he'd kill himself. I know it. He'd do it to save us from being disgraced. It's silly, but that's the way he feels about it and we've simply got to take his warped ideas for granted and look out for him. Bill, *do* you suppose he ——" Her eyes finished the question which her voice refused to enunciate.

"Honest, I don't know. There's been something underground about this whole business. I've felt it all along, but I haven't been able to get hold of a single clue. Now, the fact that this man Carter is on the trail proves beyond all question that there's a lot of moonshining or bootlegging going on somewhere pretty close. Whether your dad is mixed up in it or not, I don't know, of course. I surely hope not."

"But you're afraid he is." Joe was silent for a space. "I am, too. You see, Bill, there are the roof-

“Has He Said Anything?”

ing nails sprinkled in the road. How could daddy know he was going to be followed? He had those nails right with him, long before he knew you were going along in spite of him. You wouldn't think he'd be so secret as all that, when he was just merely going to get whisky to drink. He never was before, when he was drinking. He nearly drove mother wild, he was so bold about it, and the old dear was trying so hard to hide his sins for him; dad didn't care who knew it. And then again, why did he pull that stunt with the wrench? He must have been afraid you'd find out something ——”

“Say, aren't you afraid our enemy the sleuth will slip down here unexpectedly? Don't take a chance, kid.”

“How dumb do you think I am?” Joe retorted impatiently. “Barb is going to begin singing ‘My Sweetie Went Away’, the minute he leaves the dining room. I'll be milking the cow long before he gets here. Can you sing, Bill? Because we could manage to tell each other things that way. I know lots of the silly songs they're singing nowadays. If you could ——”

High and clear rose Barby's careless voice, singing that senseless ditty, “My sweetie went away — and didn't say why ——”

“Good night!” Joe hastily exclaimed, and that was the last Bill saw of her for a time. He was lying tranquilly on his back, right arm thrown up above his head, his pipe resting in the hollow of his left hand, when Carter came silently in through the door.

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"Seen anything of that kid?" Carter demanded immediately.

"Lost her?" Bill lowered his pipe and glanced negligently at the man. "Joe's likely to be almost anywhere at any time, Carter. What's wrong?"

"She didn't eat her supper with the rest of us. Spoiled mine for me, I admit. I like to know where every one is, when I'm in a position of this kind."

"Did you look in the corral?" Bill yawned and shifted his shoulders on the pillows. "About milking time, isn't it?" Then he chuckled, his eyes going again to Carter with a humorous light in them. "Funny, how a man will reveal himself without knowing it," he observed lazily. "What has she been doing to you, Carter, to give you 'that kid' in just that tone?"

"Too much to say," Carter replied shortly. "Too slangy and disrespectful. Butts into grown-up conversation; calls her mother old dear and tells her where to head in — she ain't too old to be spanked, and that's what she'd get if she were mine. I hate to see a kid like that rule the roost. Well, we'll be out of this in the morning, my long friend. I think you'll be able to do a little hiking ——"

"Hike — to Goldfield?" Bill was startled into trying to sit up, and found he couldn't very well. Carter leaned over and released him.

"Not just yet, Bill. I want to gather in the rest of the gang, and I expect to take you along with me;

“Has He Said Anything?”

keep an eye on you, and besides, you can show me the trail.”

“Like thunder I can!” Bill was frankly astonished. He studied Carter’s amazing statement, covering the interval by fussing with his pipe. “Ever since I landed here,” he said slowly, “I’ve been wondering if there was some kind of gang work going on, and trying to find out. I’m going to trust you, Carter — and that’s quite a compliment, if you only knew it. Your speaking of gathering in the rest of the gang is, to say the least, enlightening; goes to show there is one, just as I thought. But there’s also a complication, and that’s where I’m going to trust you with the truth. It’s like this, Carter:

“Marshall, as you probably know, is pretty much of a sot. I have been what you might call a volunteer in the fight to straighten him up, and that’s what brought me into your clutches. Some one has been furnishing him with booze right along — and if you can show us where he gets it you’ll be doing this family and me a tremendous favor. Of course, he won’t tell, but I’m satisfied that he doesn’t know anything beyond the fact that he can get it from a certain source. I don’t want you to involve him in your raid, on account of his family. I needn’t tell you what fine people they are and how it would hurt them to have his name mixed up in any whisky deal. He isn’t in on anything, I’m sure of that. For one thing, a gang of bootleggers or moonshiners — whichever they are — would be afraid to trust a man that is half balmy from

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drinking it. So if you'll give me your word that you'll lay off Marshall, and go after the source of his supply, I'll tell you all I know; little enough, worse luck."

"I thought you'd come through, give you time," Carter smiled enigmatically. "All right, Bill. To help you talk, I'll say that to date I haven't any particular evidence against Marshall himself, though I'm satisfied he's one of the bunch. I may turn up something against him, and in that case I can scarcely be expected to suppress the evidence, even to save a nice family some humiliation. He's too sick to talk about it, anyway. I think that shock of thinking he'd killed you, and then finding he hadn't, rather bowled him over for the time being. He was drunk, of course. Crazy drunk. What did he have against you?" The last question he shot out abruptly, with a keen glance behind it.

"He caught me prowling around, hunting for his whisky cache, is the only thing I know of."

"Well, you found it — and made away with it."

Bill made no answer to that.

"You folks would show better sense if you didn't try to obstruct me in my work." Carter lighted a cigarette while he waited, but Bill seemed to have nothing more to say. "Well, you were going to tell me what you know about it. It's my duty to remind you that anything you say may be used against you, of course, also that I never yet compounded a felony or took hush money. With that understood, I'd be glad to hear what you can tell me." He paused and

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added encouragingly, “I may say, too, that any help you give me in pulling in this bunch will be appreciated by the right people. It won’t hurt you at all and will probably help you a good deal.”

Bill took a long pull at his pipe, opened his lips to let the smoke surge out into the dusk, reached up and packed the top pillow against the nape of his neck.

“On second thoughts, old man, I don’t know a damn thing,” he drawled.

“That’s your privilege, Mr. Morgan,” Carter said quietly, after a considerable silence. “You certainly must know what course you mean to take, but I do think you are making a blunder. What you could tell me might serve to clear Marshall of any complicity in the matter, if that’s what you are aiming at.”

Since he had some doubt of that very thing, Bill said nothing to that. He got up, stretching his arms and testing his shoulder muscles. A hike on the morrow did not appeal to him, and he meant to suggest that they both ride Hail and Farewell up the mountain.

With a glance toward Carter for permission, he went out and sat on the bench in the moonlight that whitened as night came on. That Carter followed and sat down beside him did not trouble Bill in the least. Carter was a man with a single purpose, that of being faithful at his task; Bill could respect a man like that, even though it might make his own position more awkward.

He wondered whether the girls would be permitted to know of the trip in advance. Joe’s suggestion that

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he raise his voice in song did not strike him favorably, for two reasons. First, his singing voice was such that when he felt like warbling he usually went off somewhere by himself; the second reason was that he really knew very few songs, and Carter would probably wonder, if he did no worse, when Bill essayed to sing. Still, Joe and Barby ought to know what was coming.

He began to whistle, then, in an absent-minded way, as if he were thinking of something afar off and was unconscious of the sound. The only thing he could think of that would convey any message whatever was that pensive strain, "It's a long, long trail a winding."

The moon swung high above the tree tops of the young grove. A mocking bird sang somewhere beyond the silent house, and from the pond rose a chorus of impertinent young frogs. Bill's thoughts ranged far, returned to the incredible circumstance of his being under arrest, drifted to Marshall, lying on the borderland of sanity, awoke to the fact that he was still whistling over and over the same broken bit of melody; wondered if the girls caught any meaning from it and would be able to benefit thereby. He did not see what they could do, beyond shielding Marshall. If he were well enough they might get him out of the country while Carter was in the hills. Could he manage somehow to advise them to try it? He might extend Carter's trip by leading him off on a blind trail. Perhaps Carter would give him a few minutes

“Has He Said Anything?”

alone with Barby, on the strength of that diamond engagement ring and Joe's outrageous declaration.

“We'll start before the girls are up,” Carter observed cannily at that moment. “The sooner I wind this case up, the better, and the easier it will be for them — and you. We'll eat a camp breakfast and take those two saddle horses down in the pasture.” He turned his head and looked at Bill in the moonlight. “Marshall will be here when I get back. He's a sicker man than you've been to-day.” He glanced toward the house, looked back again at Bill. “You still think you don't know anything about this affair?”

“Not a thing,” said Bill coldly, and realized abruptly that after all he was telling the truth.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

CARTER GOES TO WHISTLEROCK

"So this is where the ore came from, eh?" Carter stood on the Whistlerock dump and stared about him in the moonlight. His voice was lowered, as if he suspected listening ears concealed not so far away, and he stood close to Bill, with his hand in his coat pocket. "About what I expected, too. Now, where's the cabin? We'll go over there and proceed exactly as if it was Hank and you come back at last. Lead the way, Bill."

Bill picked up the reins of the brown horse and led the way to the cabin in the grove of pines. Carter had left the ranch at dawn, had followed Bill's guidance for two thirds of the way and had halted him then and waited for dusk before proceeding farther. Bill had been puzzled at first, but now he thought he understood why Carter had waited. He must suspect that the headquarters of the gang was near this mine.

They staked out the horses, returned to the cabin and started a fire. Bill looked for some sign that a stranger had been there in his absence, but Hank's general disorderliness discounted what evidence there might have been and he gave over the attempt. They ate a silent meal, and Carter rose.

"Leave the light burning, Bill. We'll go back to the mine. It's possible we may have visitors this evening, and I'd as soon be outside as in when they arrive."

Carter Goes to Whistlerock

He stared at Bill while he made up his mind, then grimly got out the handcuffs.

With an impassive manner that must have exasperated Carter, Bill held out his hands, and with a grunt Carter shackled him. They walked down the narrow trail to the Whistlerock, Bill in the lead.

"I don't suppose you care to tell me how many I may expect to run across?" Carter inquired softly. "I don't insist — you have a right to throw the full burden of proof on my shoulders, of course. Still, I must repeat that I think you are making a big mistake by not talking a little."

"I'd talk," said Bill, "if I had anything to say. And I'd tell you how many men you could expect to see here, if I knew. I've never seen any, except Hank. And one night I got a glimpse of a man talking with Hank through the window. I might quote you and say that you're making a slight mistake yourself, Mr. Carter; though I wouldn't presume to tell a prohibition officer his business."

"You wouldn't? That's foolish, too. Because I'm not above taking advice. Here we are — no, don't go up on the dump. We'll stay here in the dark and I'll tell you what I had in mind to do. As you probably know, Hank went down after another packer, the output being too great for you to handle alone. I had an idea that I might be that packer, you see. Hank, we'll say, is sick and won't be at camp a few days. If you agree to help me put this over, I'll turn your hands loose again, of course. Is it a bargain?"

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Bill snorted.

"Far as I'm concerned, I promise not to attack you, and as for running away, I couldn't be hired to quit now. I'm curious to know how you are going to find a bunch of bootleggers by coming up here and packing ore off the mountain. Maybe you can make your plot hang together, but hanged if it doesn't look weak."

"Oh. You don't see how I'm going to do it, eh?"

"I do not, but I'm anxious to pick up a few pointers just the same. All you've done so far is put the handcuffs on me and take them off again. I could do that myself, if I had a key. I'd like to see a little action around here."

"I rather think you will," Carter said drily. "If you'll just tell me how they handle it at this end, and about how many——"

"I must have lost the knack of making myself clear," drawled Bill. "That, or you weren't listening when I said I have never seen a soul up here except Hank. He worked here at the mine, getting out the ore, and I packed it down to the ranch. One man slipped up and had a talk with Hank through the window, the first night I spent here, but I couldn't get a line on who he was or what he wanted. That in itself was suspicious, of course. I took it to be some one who was hiding out and wanted grub, maybe."

"Is it possible," mused Carter under his breath, "that you are telling the straight truth? If I thought you didn't know what's been going on——" He stared out across the moon-splotted mountainside and

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up at the grim escarpment above them from which the Whistlerock mine took its name. The night breeze in the pine tops whispered and sighed and covered well the murmur of their voices, and their position in deep shadow seemed to satisfy Carter that they were safe from observation or surprise. He pulled a packet of cigarettes from his pocket, sighed and put it back.

"What was your opinion of Hank's activities up here, Bill? If you don't mind telling me. I'm willing to assume for the present that you really didn't know what was going on. Now, what I would like to get at is, how did this mining strike you? And what is your honest opinion of Hank?"

"I'm not a mining expert," Bill replied slowly. "It struck me as darned hard work, mostly. Hank says the ore is high in silver and gold, and he showed me what it looked like; brownish yellow rock — rather heavy. He ought to know, but if he didn't he could probably fool me, easily enough. If it will help you, Carter, I will say that Hank seemed to be enjoying himself at my expense. I used to catch a leering look in the old fellow's eyes, as if he were putting something over on me. I didn't like it, but I never seemed able to catch him at anything."

"Well," Carter decided, after mentally digesting this, "of course we must make allowances for your being a poet. I'd give a lot, Bill, to have had this packing job myself. Don't know anything about this work up here, except what Hank told you, eh? Ever hear of the Grape Vine Bottling Works? No? They have a

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plant on the other side' of the mountains; make soft drinks, using water from a mineral spring over there. Ship in their fruit juices and bottles and kegs, claiming it's necessary to use the water right fresh from the spring, on account of certain volatile properties that are lost as the water stands. Might be right, too. Their soft drinks are very good; their *soft* drinks. Sure this isn't an old story to you?"

"Never heard of it."

"Well, some time ago a revenue officer called on them to check their output and make sure they weren't slipping up on their revenue stamps. Their tax returns didn't look right, somehow — that's out of my department. While he was prowling around he bumped into a man whose breath wasn't soft, by any means. That set him wondering if all the drinks were soft, and he tipped off our office. Know the rest of it?"

"No, but I'm listening as hard as I can, old man. I still don't see the connection between their bottled stuff and this." He nodded his head toward the ink-black portal of the incline shaft, and the sacked ore piled at one side of the dump.

"There's a link missing, I admit. Our investigators got on the job, and this is what they found — making it as brief as possible. Away back up a canyon, behind the Bottling Works, there's a mine. A dry camp, it is, and so they haul water from the Works. I may say that there's a spring of pure water inside the fence which the Works put up around their property, and

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they sell water to this mine at so much a barrel; few cents — doesn't matter. Well, we found that those water barrels held not water alone, but a lot of two-gallon, wooden kegs. We know they go to this mine, but so far we can't catch 'em coming back. They get their supplies at Gold Center, but the trail is covered there. We've about concluded that they use a heap of sugar and corn meal for a camp that size, but there isn't a sign of anything coming *out*. Do you see what that means?"

"If you're sure the kegs went in, something must come out somewhere, I should say."

"Not over there, it doesn't, yet they're bottling whisky and slipping it out with their soft drinks. They have a picture of a bunch of grapes growing on a vine, for their trademark. Nice, purple grapes, natural as life. You'd think the variation in the coloring is the printer's fault, but we've discovered that the bottles of Grape Nectar carrying a certain off-color shade of grapes are really a very fair grade of corn whisky."

"I still fail to see the connection with this." Bill nodded toward the camp.

"You don't? I was in hopes you would, because that corn whisky comes out of the hills on this side and goes, by a roundabout way, to the Grape Vine Bottling Works. They've been clever enough to break the trail completely, at least twice that we know of. We know that empty kegs and other things — corn meal and sugar, mostly — go to that new mine

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back here in the hills, but it drops out of sight there. There isn't a drop of moonshine being made at the mine, and we've combed the hills around there — wherever there's water. By a process of elimination we know it's somewhere close to here. Hank let out enough to make me sure of it, and according to him, you are a most important link in the chain between still and bottles."

"They must know how to make me work in my sleep, if they've been making a link out of me," Bill sighed. "I'm afraid friend Hank was having fun with you."

"Ever see any one go under ether, Bill?" Carter chuckled. "They talk, as a rule. No sense to it, usually — aimless gabble, totally untrustworthy. But now and then — Well, I was present when they sewed up Hank's head. I waited till he was pretty well under, but still fighting to keep from dropping off — you know how they act. When I thought the time was right, I leaned over and said in his ear, 'Look out for that keg! What's the matter with it?' Hank gave a flop and a mumble and yelled out, 'Take it back and fill 'er full! You kin hear it sloshin' —' and then he cussed and used your name quite plentifully, Bill. His opinion of Bill Woods wasn't pretty, but you know he thought it was you who hit him on the head."

"Fill it full — he could hear it slosh —" Bill repeated aloud. "Can't see how that applies to me, Carter. Must have been just ether talk —" He

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rose abruptly and walked straight out into the moonlight, making for the mine mouth.

Carter cursed him under his breath and followed. He too had left the shadow and was running in bright moonlight after Bill when he saw Bill pitch forward. On the heels of that came the thin pow-w of a rifle shot from the cliff. Carter hesitated in full stride, whirled and started back, when he too fell headlong, the second report following close.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

MARSHALL TURNS TO THE LIGHT

LYING in the one spare bed pulled close to the windows overlooking the grove and the pond — the screened sleeping place in the grove being inconvenient for good nursing — Marshall's closed eyelids shut in a soul sickened, staring at the stark ruin it had made of life. Thinking, thinking, thinking — when they thought him asleep or lying in the stupor of complete exhaustion. Exhausted he was, it is true. His body lay inert, too utterly tired to move. But the man himself was terribly alive, terribly just and with no mercy to soften his judgment of himself.

He heard murmurs in the next room, murmuring on the porch, whispered consultation and advice at his very bedside. The women wondered whether a doctor should be brought. His wife covered her dread of disclosure with thin optimism; he was resting — a doctor would order the very things they were doing for him; a light, nourishing diet and complete rest. Joe agreed with her mother, fearing a doctor's diagnosis of her father's mental condition. Barby was sympathetic, helpless, glad to see the cheerful side of it if there were any comfort for her aunt. They decided to continue as they were unless some change showed for the worse. And on the evening of that second day, when he was roused for his supper of hot milk with an egg beaten in and a dust of nutmeg on top — Mrs.

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Marshall's favorite dish for invalids — he surprised her by holding the glass himself, swallowing the contents in a deep gulp or two, and setting the glass down with a gesture of decision.

"Bring the girls — and I want Bill," he said.

Mrs. Marshall felt her heart turn over in her chest. Families were assembled for deathbed scenes.

"Don't you feel — just right, dear?" She bent over him, a kind of terror in her eyes.

"Well enough. Well as I can expect. Call Bill and the girls, Henrietta."

Henrietta moved toward the door, hesitated with her eyes wide and her lips parted, turned and left the room hurriedly. Marshall lay back on the pillow and closed his eyes like a man who is very, very tired but who is nevertheless determined to carry out the thing he has planned to do. Presently he heard flutters of thin dresses, the soft tread of careful feet. His eyes opened upon three apprehensive women who were looking at him anxiously, fairly holding their breath in the face of an unknown crisis. The ether about him seemed charged with their fear, and he shook his head impatiently while his glance sought swiftly around the room and through the open door.

"Where's Bill?"

"Bill" — Joe swallowed — "Bill went up the mountain; to the mine; with Carter."

"Who's Carter?"

"Don't you remember, daddy? The man who came out on the desert after us?"

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Marshall shut his eyes, held the lids down for a moment, raised them suddenly. His tongue tip went swiftly along his lip, moistening the dryness; the trick of a drunkard.

"It's come — I thought perhaps that's why he came after us. Bill sent for him, I suppose. Well, it doesn't matter now. But I wanted Bill — Carter too, since he's here — to listen to what I'm going to say. Means another telling, but no matter.

"Henrietta, and you girls, it's time, I think, that you should know the kind of a man I have been. I'm not dying, I'm sorry to say. Neither am I crazy, as you are probably thinking. I did make the attempt to end my life in the desert, decently, leaving behind me the supposition that I had lost my mind and wandered off. That plan was thwarted. I can only suppose, then, that God — I assume that there is a God, because there is so great a need of one — has decreed that I am to live and make atonement.

"How much you know or suspect, I can't say. However, I shall assume ——" He broke off, moistened his lips again, looked away from them, out of the window. "I'm using platform words to stave off the ugly truth. Still weak, squirming — but the truth is this, Henrietta. I am not only a drunkard. I have fallen lower than that. The other night I attempted to murder Bill. Until I saw him in the desert I thought I had done so. I tried to murder him because I believed that he was a federal officer, sent to watch me and to ferret out another crime of which I am guilty.

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"For the sake of getting all the whisky I could drink, I have been aiding and abetting a system of moonshining and bootlegging, the full extent of which I don't know. It must be a big thing, however. I did not share in the profits, except that I was to be kept supplied with whisky, delivered to me here at the ranch. It seemed to me a godsend — you women have no conception of what a craving for liquor is like." He looked at them, looked away again. "It's curious," he said, half to himself. "Since I struck that blow I have had only a horror of drinking. I shall never touch it again under any circumstances. If not Bill, who was that man?" His eyes were upon his wife, demanding the truth.

Joe moved closer to her mother, slipped an arm around her waist.

"That was Hank, but he's all right. Mr. Carter took him to Goldfield that same night. Then he arrested Bill."

"Arrested — but Bill is an officer, I'm sure!" Marshall interjected. "He was searching the place for whisky, and I was afraid he would find it. Henrietta, unless it has been removed, that five-gallon canteen on the truck ——"

"I poured that all out, daddy," Joe interrupted. "Carter thinks Bill got away with it, but I did it myself. I wish you would stop talking about it, daddy. Why worry mother with all this?"

"Worry me!" Mrs. Marshall took Joe's arm away and moved close to the bed, her eyes and lips hard.

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“Charles Marshall, I could curse the day I married you! All these years I’ve taken the brunt of your drunkenness — seen you drop down and down, tried to shield you from the contempt of the public. I’ve lied to my own child for you! — I have covered up — smoothed things over — lied and smiled and made excuses for you, so that your own child might go on respecting you. I couldn’t see you rob yourself of her love, I couldn’t see her life spoiled as mine has been with your swinishness. I’ve tried to reform you. I’ve shut myself away from the things that make my life livable, just to help *you* — to shield you from temptation, make it easier for you to be a man! And what thanks? You lie there and calmly tell Joe and Barby the very things I’ve been trying to shield them from, in shame that Joe’s father should be so low — so despicable a failure! My God, Charles, are you *boasting* that you tried to kill a man — I’ll have you know that Bill, as you call him, is a famous man who wouldn’t *look* at you on the street — and you tried to kill him and then run off and die in the desert, pretending to be insane! A fine, cowardly thing to do! I’ve suffered a thousand deaths for you, Charles Marshall, but now I’m — I’m ——”

“You’re going to buck up and show whether you’ve got the real stuff in you, old dear!” Joe’s clear young voice swept through the torrent of words as a clean wind sweeps through fog. “Excuse me for butting in, but you don’t mean all that, you know. I tried to keep you from finding out about dad, but since you

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seem to know as much about it as I do, the thing to do now is to give him a hand."

"I'll give him nothing. What has he ever given me but trouble and disgrace? Ever since I married him, almost, I've fought to keep him from drinking and to keep people from despising him. Now he's completed the disgrace — a bootlegger for the whisky he can drink! — an attempted suicide, an attempted murderer! Now, when he's dragged us in the mud, he ——"

"Why, now he's going to do a come-back that we'll be proud of! And we're going to help, and glad to do it. Dad's got the stuff in him to put it over, now he's made up his own mind. That's a lot different, you know, mother, from making up his mind for him."

Mrs. Marshall turned and looked at Joe with somber pity for her youth and ignorance.

"Oh, my child, you haven't had the broken promises and the deception to bear that I have borne. Your father — a sot and an attempted ——"

"Say, listen, mother!" Joe's voice took on an edge. "My father isn't going to find out that his daughter's a dud! Now's the very time to stand by and help him out, don't you see? We'd look nice, wouldn't we, turning him down now? What you do about your husband is your own affair, I suppose — but it seems to me that when you married dad you let yourself in for a life's job, old dear. Why be a quitter now, when there's something to work for? And don't think for a minute that I haven't known all about dad,

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ever since I was in kindergarten. I'm not so shocked as you may think, mother. I just knew that some day he'd wake up and really *want* us to rally round. If he had to bean Hank, in order to see where the trail was leading to, let's be thankful he didn't aim straight, and forget about it. And as for bootlegging — well, there's where we are going to get busy and protect him, if possible. Anyway, he's too sick to go to jail — aren't you, dad? And it'll be just a fine, probably, and I'd be tickled foolish to sell some of my birthday pearls to help out."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," Mrs. Marshall began, and looked at Marshall with the beginning of tears in her eyes. "Oh!" The sound was a wailing cry of surrender, of shame for her brief rebellion. She went down on her knees beside the bed. "Charles — Charles — if only you mean it — I'll be the happiest woman on earth!"

Marshall reached out a fumbling hand to her head, but his eyes went to Joe with a wondering look which Joe met with a smile held steady by sheer will power, while her eyes brimmed with tears.

"I always said parents are a great responsibility," she declared shakily and blew her dad a kiss. "Come on, Barb. The young lovers want to be alone. And besides, the dishes aren't washed yet."

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE SIEGE AT WHISTLEROCK

"CARTER?" Bill breathed the word in a tone that would not have carried thirty feet.

A stifled sound came from the edge of the dump; a sound like a groan cut short in the beginning.

"Carter, are you hurt?"

"Not much — shoulder hit. You damned fool, are you all right?"

"Sorry, old man. Didn't think you'd follow me. Think they'll come down to investigate?"

"Fools if they don't," grunted Carter, keeping his voice down. "May watch to see if we move. Pump a few more into us if we do. Are you hurt?"

"No-o — but I never disliked handcuffs more than I do this minute."

"Too bad," growled Carter. "But if I come over there they'll plug me, sure. Once is a plenty."

"Can't you walk like a snake? One wiggle at a time — it counts up quicker than you'd think. I worked it out in a story, not long ago. Fellow made fifty yards in a little while. Just keep your body flat as you can and — you're lying almost broadside to me. That's fine. You can move sidewise. If you make an inch or two, let me know and I'll make an inch or two. Don't talk, old man. You can't murmur like the wind in the pine tops — guess you never made love at a picnic — or talked secrets at a reception."

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"Making a speech?" Carter retorted with sarcasm.

"Merely mingling my voice with the pines. Whistlerock was well named, for there are murmurs and whistlings up here — many a night I sat and tried to fit words to them. Comes in handy now."

"By golly, you are," Carter muttered admiringly. It was really surprising, now he gave his attention to it, how Bill's voice blended with the blurred humming of the wind overhead. It had quite lost that vibrant quality that cuts through lesser vibrations and carries above the small noises of the wild. Privately Carter promised himself that if he ever got out of this scrape he would learn to pitch his voice in harmony with his surroundings. A useful accomplishment.

"Tell me, how is the snake's progress?"

"Made a foot or so."

"Easy, old man. Keep your ears open. If you hear them coming — you will, for it's all rocks, above here — get up and make a run for it. Here. We'll hole up in the mine."

"All right — but that ain't poet talk, Bill. That's outlaw."

"Well, I've dodged many a posse — on the typewriter, Carter."

"Good safe place!" grunted Carter, stifling another groan.

"Carter?" There had been a silence that seemed long.

Carter groaned, and Bill heard a feeble stirring, as if the wounded man was trying to lift himself along.

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"Can you throw that key over here, Carter?"

"I — dunno. Hit my — shoulder. Put me — out for a minute."

"Toss the key over here. Don't wait."

Silence, hard to endure. Then a muttered warning, a clink of metal on the rocks. Not close enough — not nearly close enough for a man whose hands must move together or not at all. Bill hitched himself along slowly, inch by inch as he had advised Carter to do. It was risky, in that white moonlight. He had marked with his full attention the spot where the key had fallen and he kept his eye on the place. He would have to turn on his side, get his manacled hands in a certain position. He would have given much for one free hand that could reach out stealthily, fingers groping for the key. It seemed to him that a full hour dragged by while he was working his body slowly toward the key — yet the moon stood still in that clear space in the sky, the shadows had not lengthened. Carter was lying still.

From somewhere up on Whistlerock cliff Bill heard a voice. An oath or two, cut short. He could not be sure, but it seemed to him that whoever was up there was coming down; which seemed unreasonable, too, when he remembered how, even in broad daylight, the cliff showed a perpendicular wall. His two hands moved out from his body, searching blindly for the key. Until he had that he was practically helpless, and so was Carter.

"Damn' good shootin'," a voice stated satisfiedly,

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closer than was comfortable for Bill. "Croaked 'em both."

"Don't rush up too quick!" another voice admonished. "If there's any more they're stallin' off, waitin' fer us t' do that."

"There ain't any more. Jest them two."

"Anyway, they'll keep, I reckon."

Bill's little finger touched metal. He felt carefully, got the key and discovered that freeing himself was not so simple a matter. A minute was gone before he had learned the trick of holding the key just so between thumb and finger, but he managed it and slipped the manacles into his pocket before he gathered himself together cautiously and looked at Carter.

Twice his length away, Carter was lying motionless, one arm straight down by his side, the other crooked above his head. Even at that short distance he had a lifeless look. Bill mentally measured the seconds it would cost him to get up, rush back, pick up Carter and run to the mine mouth. If he were quick enough he might accomplish half of the feat before those who watched recovered from their surprise. Yet it had not taken them long to shoot when he had darted out of the shadow; nor to fire again at Carter. The hum of the bullet that had warned him to drop was no more than two or three seconds ahead of Carter's fall. It appeared that the two above him were in no hurry to approach closer to the dump. They were waiting to see if more would walk out of the shadows. Bill remembered something and began to send questing

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glances up from under his eyebrows. There had been a lot of baling wire for use in fastening the mouths of the ore sacks. His eyes gleamed when they discovered a loose bundle just beyond him.

“Car’er-ol’man ——” Bill’s voice might have been the wind droning through the rocks. Certainly it sounded little like human speech, but a faint sound answered him. Carter also must have heard that bit of dialogue up among the rocks.

“You-hold’-wire — I pul-l ——”

Carter’s fingers closed upon the wire loop that touched his hand. How many anxious minutes had been spent in pushing the wire to the point of contact with Carter’s hand, Bill never attempted to guess, but he knew that his face was beaded with perspiration before he had accomplished what he set out to do.

It was slow, ticklish work. His hope lay in the probability that their enemies were not gluing their eyes to what appeared to be two dead bodies, but would be watching the grove for some sign that would betray the presence of others as yet unseen. He guessed that their eyes would instinctively avoid those two bodies, once they were satisfied that both were down to stay. Wherefore Bill wormed forward in the moonlight, advancing a few inches and then waiting while he dragged Carter a like distance. It was not easy. Carter was a heavy man, and with one shoulder and arm useless he could not help Bill, except that he could hang grimly to the loop that cut painfully into his fingers when the full weight of his body

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came on them with a jerk. It was cruelly hard work for both.

Bill had brought Carter up to the point where he himself had lain. He had got to his feet, safe in the shelter of the incline portal, when he heard a startled exclamation among the rocks. An oath followed, and there was the sound of men scrambling hastily over boulders. Bill dropped the wire, darted out into the open, caught Carter just under the arms and darted back, flinching violently at the last, when the rifle spoke again. But he laid Carter down well within the incline and laughed aloud while he felt for his gun.

"Hear 'em? They missed one body. Too late, though. That wire trick fooled them. Where are your extra shells?"

"Pocket," grunted Carter feebly, showing that although he was helpless, his mind was on the job. "Hurt?"

"No. Dodged that shot. We're safe, in here. They can't hit us, shooting straight in, on account of the downward slant. I had that in mind. They'll have to come right up and shoot down at us, Carter — and I'll take care of any one who tries that stunt! Fine, safe burrow, this. Can I do anything for you, old man?"

"Stop the bleeding — if you can. It's that — makes me so damn' weak ——"

One eye on the mine mouth, one ear cocked for the sound of footsteps, Bill pulled off his shirt and made some sort of bandage. Now, all at once it seemed,

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the light was fading outside as the moon slid farther and farther down the sky. He hurried, but with only his sense of touch to guide his ministrations he was awkward at best, and it did not help him much when Carter fainted and went limp in his arms as he lifted to place the bandage under his shoulder. Nor did it help to feel a bullet hole in his own leg and the warm trickle of blood stealing down into his sock.

Crouched within the black shade of the incline, his eyes peering over the lip of the portal under the crude windlass which Hank had lately fashioned when the vein dipped nearly vertical, Bill waited. His crude dressing seemed to have checked the bleeding of Carter's wound, for presently that individual pulled himself into a half sitting position and feebly remarked that he would give a dollar for a drink of water.

"There's water in the bottom of this burrow," Bill told him equably. "If you can wait till daylight I'll get some. Think you can manage?"

"I think so," Carter replied in the tone that went with the twisted smile; which served to ease Bill's mind considerably. He could not be sure, but he thought he had heard some one moving just beyond the dump and he wanted above all things to guard against a surprise. The sound came again and he moved uneasily.

"Inside my shirt there's a flashlight," said Carter, interpreting Bill's movement according to his experience. "One of those long-distance kind. Better focus it down the shaft — here it is. Turn the bottom till

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it's right — you know, don't you? Spray it around, out there — and be ready to shoot at anything you see. Can't let 'em come up close."

The sudden brilliance revealed a man's head appearing over the top of the dump, and Bill fired at it without any compunction whatever. It seemed to him that the head disappeared too abruptly to have been pulled back to safety, but that was only a guess. He swept the light farther and took a chance shot at a figure just dodging behind a pine tree. From that tree came a shot that threw dust in Bill's face and he shut off the light involuntarily and withdrew for the time being.

"Well, they know we aren't dead in here," he observed complacently. "I saw only two. Would that be all, do you think?"

"All that's needed over here, besides you and Hank," Carter grunted. "Think I'd come alone after more than a couple of men?" Carter's shoulder was aching frightfully and his throat was parched, but the thing that irked him most was the necessity of lying back while Bill did his fighting for him. Seeking the protection of a prisoner was a new and unpleasant experience for Carter, and his temper suffered.

"Some of those ore sacks wouldn't make a bad barricade," Bill suggested when some minutes had passed without further incident. "They're piled close — think I'd better pull two or three over here?"

When Carter merely grunted, Bill swept the dump and the grove once more with the light, saw nothing

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and crept painfully out to where he could lay hold of a sack. It was all well enough to lie snug below the lip of the portal, but he thought he could lie snugger behind a barricade when daylight came; the enemy would then be compelled to venture close to the portal before shooting, unless they blazed blindly away at the ore itself.

His leg pained him considerably, but he knew that it would probably feel worse later on, so he persisted at his volunteer job, counting on the irregularity of his illumination to keep the fellows under cover. They must have heard him pulling the sacks of ore into position, but one random shot was the only sign they gave of being still in the vicinity.

"How many sacks of ore have you got piled out there, Bill?" Carter asked, when Bill had piled the fifth sack in the opening.

"If it's important, I'll try and count them," drawled Bill. "Hank's been busy as a honey bee since I packed the last load, for there must be fifteen or twenty sacks all ready to ship."

"Worth protection, eh? Why not build your barricade outside so you can see both sides as well as in front? Those fellows are still on hand, aren't they?"

"They seem to be."

"Then they'll probably stay. Figure on starving us out, most likely. May do it, too — unless you can pick them off." He was silent for a bit. Then, "Damn this shoulder!" he gritted resentfully. "First time I was ever put out of the game."

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Bill did not answer. He had turned the light on the grove, and while Carter was speaking he fired at a moving figure; missed and fired again.

"Hitting anything?" Carter inquired restlessly. "Or are you trying to scare 'em to death? My God, I thought poets could *talk!*"

"You're doing all right, old man. Go on. I can talk when you're asleep."

Carter swore and remarked that if he were looking after a wounded man he'd have gumption enough to get a cigarette and light it for him. So presently, Bill having taken the hint, he was finding what solace he could in a smoke.

Bill was hungry for his pipe, but he was obliged to forego the comfort of it until such time as his hands were not more than full of other more vital matters. He risked being shot while he pulled the sacks of ore forward, silently conceding that Carter's suggestion was a good one. He even managed to drag a ragged square of canvas over the peeled pine windlass, which would later screen them from both sun and enemy eyes. How long they would be held there he did not care to guess. Others might come to strengthen the siege; one watcher at a time would be sufficient to hold them prisoners there, while Carter's wound made escape impossible. Bill considered attempting to steal out before daylight in the hope of reaching the ranch and getting help there, but he gave up the notion when he realized that Carter would not be able to hold the fort alone.

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Long before daylight he had completed the shifting of the sacked ore and was ready to drop from weariness. Carter had dozed uneasily. The spiteful bark of the rifle outside roused him and set Bill to peering anxiously into the grove ready to retaliate. But he was too late to locate the source of the bullet that spat into the windlass over his head.

"Lord, but I'm dry!" groaned Carter.

"Lo, the rosy morn approacheth, old man. If you can manage to hold this gun and take a shot if necessary, I'll see about the water supply. I can't use the light because I'm going to take out the battery and use the case for a drinking cup. Can you handle the gun for a minute?"

There was not much water to be had, but Bill did not tell Carter that. A slow seepage through a seam in the limerock yielded a pint or more of water in a hollow that Hank had gouged out with his pick, probably in the expectation of having at hand water for drilling. Little enough, but much better than none at all, Bill thought, as he carried the flashlight case nearly full to Carter. Their wounds must go unbathed and untended; enough that they need not suffer the full torture of thirst.

Full morning showed a quiet grove, except that the birds and chipmunks were busy with their housekeeping. Carter openly mourned because Bill had not been able to shoot down the men who had them bottled in the mine. Murder looked desirable and altogether praiseworthy just then to Carter.

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Bill eased his wounded leg into a less painful position and wondered how long they could hold out, and whether he must actually buy their release with those two misguided souls out there. Now that the proposition confronted him as the only alternative to losing his own life and Carter's, killing a man in the hills lost all its picturesque quality of adventure. Had all his fictional killings been merely a sordid trading of this life for that? This was, he supposed, an adventure of the kind he had woven into stories and sold. It held all the qualities he had deemed necessary to red-blooded fiction. But somehow, reality lacked the thrill he had always fancied it contained. It was nothing more or less than a mean combination of hunger, thirst, the pain of torn thigh muscles and a poignant anxiety over the outcome; that, and the probability that he would end the day by having murdered a man because it was to his interest to do so. Unless, of course, he himself was killed for the same reason.

While the hours dragged to noon and then to dusk, Bill's thoughts dragged round and round the dilemma and found neither hope nor any zest therein; perhaps because the watchers in the grove contented themselves with keeping themselves out of sight and sending an occasional shot toward the barricade as a reminder of their presence. Red-eyed with loss of sleep, Bill watched and waited and never succeeded in getting a glimpse of them.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THE RESCUE

JOE banged the screen door behind her and knocked a chair over in her headlong rush across the dining room, but she reached her father's room with her full power of speech intact.

"Dad Marshall, something's got to be done about Bill and that officer! Do you know where they are, this minute? Holed up in your mine, while a couple of men shoot at them every few minutes. Lobo and I sneaked up there by the short cut to see what was going on and why they didn't come on back, and that's the kind of party we ran into. My word! That man Carter must be an awful smear, to get himself and Bill into a hole like that!"

"Two men, you say? Did they see you, Josephine?"

"Two men, and they did not. One had a rag tied around his head, and they were both standing behind trees and watching the mine. Lobo was getting all ready to bark or something, but I felt his hair begin to rise up on his neck, so I cuffed him and shut him up. One man had a rifle and he took a rest against the tree and shot — with the most diabolical deliberation imaginable! Shall I take a gun and ——"

"No!" Marshall's hands went white-knuckled on the arms of the big rocking chair where he was sitting by the window. "Get in the car, Josephine, and go

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after Nelson. Tell him to drop everything and come at once, and bring his rifle with him."

"Never thought of Nelson!" Joe exclaimed in a tone of relief. Once more the screen door banged shut behind her, and in another minute or so the touring car went roaring up through the grove on the road to Nelson's shack. At that rate Nelson would be on the trail in less than fifteen minutes.

As a matter of fact, Joe had him in the dining room just twelve minutes from the time she had left it, and she threw open the door to her father's room and cried "He's here, daddy", before Nelson had remembered to take off his hat in the house. Joe stood staring. Her father's light bath robe which he had worn a few minutes before lay just as he had dropped it off in the middle of the floor, and the owner was gone. Joe rushed to the wide porch and did not see him. She turned a bit pale as a certain thought edged into her mind, but she pushed it back and turned to Nelson, her eyes hard.

"Daddy's gone — again. But we can't wait to hunt him up now. He couldn't do anything, anyway. Wait till I get my shotgun and we'll start. I'll show you the way. And Nelse, I won't have time to talk when we start up the hill, so I'll tell you now that you will have to *shoot*, when you get there. They're outlaws, remember — for they're trying to kill an officer."

"I know," Nelson replied with a stolid calm that was the best tonic in the world just then. "I bet I shoot, all right!"

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In the yard they met Mrs. Marshall, who looked with surprise and some consternation at their haste, armed as they both were.

"It's Bill and Carter, up at the mine, fighting bootleggers. We're going to help. Mother, dad's gone off somewhere again, and you better see if you can find him. We'll be back soon as we get things settled, up there. Don't worry!" With Lobo on the leash she disappeared among the rocks that abutted on the stable and corral, Nelson at her heels.

"Don't worry!" muttered Mrs. Marshall, making her way with blind, stumbling steps to the house. "May the Lord have mercy on this family! Charles will be next—nothing on earth can save him if his gang has taken to fighting. My poor baby!"

Her poor baby was setting Nelson a terrific pace up the mountainside, in spite of the fact that this was her second trip. As on another eventful trip, Lobo strained at the leash and pulled Joe along with him, thus taking half the labor off climbing. Nelson had good, sturdy legs, but they had been trained to following the plow and the steepness of the blind, rocky trail soon had him puffing so audibly that Joe felt constrained to halt at the first level until he had got his wind.

"It isn't more than a mile, straight up this way," she heartened him. "I don't suppose they dream that I know the way, and have been up here more than once. The trail goes away around. When I look back and shake my head at you, Nelse, stop puffing and

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grunting if it kills you. We'll be close, and our only hope is to take them by surprise. Besides, you'll need steady nerves for it. We've simply got to bluff them off."

"I don't bluff nobody. I shoot."

Joe looked at him, his heavy face crimson with the climb, sweat-streaked, grim. A burly man, sober-minded, phlegmatically bent on carrying through whatever he undertook. She turned and went on, Lobo forging ahead with his nose to the ground. They heard shooting, and Nelson gripped his rifle tighter, his jaws clamped together.

Joe signalled Nelson into caution as the little meadow came into sight, some distance to the right of them. The two horses were stepping uneasily around in their close-cropped circle, the picket ropes worn smooth and hard from dragging over the mountain sod. They spied the two and nickered wistfully, but Joe edged away to the left, going carefully through the timber, the dog's leash shortened so that her hand could grasp his collar and quiet him.

Two shots, rather close together. Nelson lifted his rifle, glancing down while he released the safety with his thumb. He brushed past Joe, walking with legs half-bent, rifle raised and ready to aim. He might have been stalking a deer or a covey of mountain quail. Joe shivered as she watched him, turned her back and shut her eyes against the thing that must be coming next. At her feet Lobo crouched, grinning, alert, a faint rumbling under the lifted hair on his throat.

The Rescue

Nelson lifted his rifle, aimed, lowered it slowly, made as if to raise it again. He stood so, poised, watching. Then quite suddenly he fired — twice. Joe gave another violent shudder and went down, burying her face in Lobo's neck very much as she had done on the desert. Lobo winced when she touched the healing wound on his head, perked his ears toward the mine and gave a short bark.

"Hey! Almost I shoot you, Mr. Marshall!" Nelson's voice boomed with cheerful resonance. "I don't know you are coming up here also. That all?" The last two words plainly showed how his mind had veered to another matter.

"I think so," Marshall's voice replied nervously. "You did it very quickly, Nelson. I — yes, I came ahead, since it seemed to me that the matter was urgent. I — er — just arrived ahead of you. I suppose ——" Joe did not hear what more her father had to say, for he was leading the way to the mine and besides, his voice was lowered.

Just within the portal, Bill was staring stupidly down at the aromatic trickle which seeped from under the barricade. Carter, propped against the wall, was eyeing him with a curious intentness. Bill looked up, met his steady stare and pulled his lips to a mirthless grin.

"Whistlerock ore has sprung a leak somewhere," he observed gravely. "So that's what they call high-grade, is it?"

"That's what you've been packing out of here, Bill,

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I've been wondering all along whether you're a darn good actor, or whether you didn't know. If it's acting, you deserve to get by with it. You're not under arrest any longer, you know."

"That's fine," gloomed Bill. "Maybe it'll help some at the pearly gates. You know they've got reinforcements out there, don't you?"

"Thought I heard different guns. Well ——"

Bill whirled — slowly, because he was very stiff and sore — and thrust the muzzle of his gun fairly into Marshall's face before he saw who he was. That was the first inkling they had of any relief at hand. Even then Bill was not so sure, until Lobo bounded across the dump with Joe, bareheaded, close behind.

And all the while, from a bullet-punctured keg of whisky in the center of a sack of ore, that telltale stream trickled out, smelling to high heaven and a westering sun.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

THE HUMAN SIDE OF THE LAW

MARSHALL, looking rather white around the mouth, helped Nelson place two canvas-wrapped bodies in the back of the truck and returned heavy-footed to the bunk house where Carter and Bill were absorbing what comfort was to be had in two beds, all the food they could swallow and a heavenly safety from immediate peril.

"I — if you will permit me to offer a suggestion," Marshall began in his nervous way, "I would think it a good idea to let me drive the touring car in. I — would prefer not to drive the truck. I ——"

"Nelson's going to drive the truck," Carter stated calmly. "Good man, Nelson. Good shot, too. He saved a lot of trouble."

Marshall winced and looked away, moistening his lips.

"Then I suppose I may drive ——"

"Bill's arms aren't crippled," Carter interrupted again. "No reason why he shouldn't drive, I guess. Road's pretty good, and we'll take my car. His left leg's all right."

"Of course, you understand that I — I shall make no attempt ——" He swallowed. "I shall not attempt to escape, Mr. Carter."

"Escape what?" Carter twisted his lips. "They

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don't call it a crime to *drink* moonshine, Mr. Marshall. Nor to — er — shoot in defence of an officer of the law. No, I'm afraid I haven't any use for you this time. I'm afraid your excitement is all over, and you'll have to content yourself with looking after your family." He drew a mouthful of smoke thoughtfully, looked at his cigarette and wiped off a bit of ash. "If you could manage somehow to find that still, and keep an eye on that whisky they hid in your ore, Mr. Marshall, the government will be very much obliged to you. In fact, I'm going to deputize you to take charge of things here. You and the little girl and that dog ought to be able to hold forth in that cabin up there, if necessary, until my partner, Williams, can get down here from Goldfield. Would you mind staying up there on guard for a day or so, Mr. Marshall?"

"I don't think there's a chance in the world that any one will come over from the Gold Center gang, but in case they do you may have a bit of work to do. I advise pushing those sacks of camouflaged kegs down into the shaft, taking some kind of a camp outfit and camping right there, where Bill and I held forth. No one would be apt to know what had become of these two that — er — Chris got; at least, not before Williams can get on the job with his men. We've got to take these bodies in to-night, and the sooner Bill and I get to a doctor the better, so I don't see but what you'll have to manage. I thought, with that game kid and her dog ——"

"You could turn the whole thing over to the kid

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and forget about it!" Bill exclaimed with emphasis. Just as well to give Marshall a minute or two, he thought. "I'd back Joe to handle the whole gang if she happened to run into them. You'll maybe have a chance, Mr. Marshall, to get back at the fellows who helped themselves to your ore for a blind. It's a moral certainty that the buyers were more anxious to get those kegs than they were the silver in the ore. But you'll have the last laugh — am I right, Carter?"

"You are, Bill." Carter was very busy, studying his cigarette. "But Mr. Marshall isn't the first man made to look foolish by a gang of their stripe. Moonshiners and bootleggers," he added gravely, "make it a point to use perfectly innocent people whenever it's possible. They may even try to lay the blame on the men they use in that way, if they get in a corner. But we're hard to fool, if I do say it. Take Williams, for instance. He's a wise bird if ever there was one."

"I — you can depend on me, Mr. Carter." Marshall stood up, his whole person giving an intangible impression of a mental squaring of shoulders. "I've been a knave and a fool, and worse. Whisky had me down — so low down that I attempted your life, Bill, the other night. Mr. Carter, it is only right that you should know I am the man who struck old Hank. I mistook him for Bill, whom I had caught trying to find my whisky. I ——"

"Yes, well — no use wasting time on trifles. If Bill didn't deserve a rap on the head, Hank certainly

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did. And remember this, Mr. Marshall. If you were the only man in the country who was a slave to drink, Volstead would never have been heard of outside his own district! And I never knew of a case," he grinned humorously, "where whisky made a man any better! I hear you've cut it out. All I can say is, I wish every booze-fighter in the country could be cured by giving him a good hefty wrench and turning him loose on a moonshiner. It would soon put us officers out of a job, but we wouldn't grudge that. Speaking unofficially, Mr. Marshall, I want to thank you for that blow. I couldn't have asked for a prettier situation than the one I walked into, helping old Hank get to Goldfield; simplified my round-up considerably and saved a lot of mistakes all around. Now, if you'll just call us in a couple of hours, Mr. Marshall, Bill and I will take a nap and be ready to start."

Marshall went out, looking dazed. Carter waited until he was well outside, then looked across at Bill and lowered an eyelid.

"Aside from enjoying myself, as Joe puts it, knowing a man like you is worth the trip over here," Bill said softly after a silence.

"Oh, thunder!" grunted Carter. "That's the trouble with a poet — he's so darned sentimental."

"Yes, Mr. Williams," Joe observed, in what Bill would have called a funny, grown-up, prim voice, "my dog found the camp where they had been making liquor, but my father thought we had better not go up

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there until you arrived. He didn't know just what course you might want to take."

Williams, a man of nearly Bill's height, but thinner than Bill, thanked her politely and suggested that she show him the spot. Which Joe, with the ubiquitous Lobo trotting ahead, proceeded to do.

From the Whistlerock mine a deep, water-worn gully ran up toward the cliff. Joe took Williams and his men up that, to a place where the cliff jugged out in what was apparently an unbroken bulge in the wall, but which actually concealed a fissure behind it, as if the bulge had been caused by a split in the rock. This was as far as Joe had gone, she said.

That the camp was near, the odor of souring mash testified. Moreover, a rope sling hung down from the top of the fissure. Without a doubt the kegs of whisky had been lowered from the cliff, then carried down to the mine to be packed in the ore. Williams gave one glance and went up, followed closely by his men; a hard scramble, too, though not sufficient to daunt Joe, who wanted much to see what a still looked like — and perhaps to make sure there would be nothing to point a finger at her daddy. She may even have made a surreptitious investigation on the day of her discovery and thought it best to fib about it; one can't be positive of anything where Joe is concerned.

An ideal spot for such purpose, Williams declared. There was ample room, back under the overhanging rock. The cliff went on up, another fifty feet or so, with the most precarious trail of all from ledge to top;

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so precarious that a rope was necessary there also. And from the ledge one could lie flat and see the cabin, the mine, the little meadow — all within rifle shot. There was a small spring, too, back under the wall, where the mash was going bad in barrels and the flies were holding drunken revel.

"Too bad," said Williams, "that friend Carter missed this find. Look at that still, will you! Ever see a classier outfit, Bob? Hundred gallon, run with a gasoline stove — away out here! That's to get away from showing a smoke, up here. Well, if the little girl will stand over here, you can take pictures of the camp, Bob, and then you and Elkins better climb up and take the trail back, and see where they got their stuff from. That rope's for letting stuff up and down — we'll send up a couple of canteens. Don't spend too much time, but make it back here before dark. Guess you can stay here, all right. Seems to be everything you'll need. We'll camp down at the cabin to-night. This is a two-man outfit, all right. Then to-morrow we'll move the stuff."

Joe, standing a little apart with the dog on guard before her, lifted her head.

"You aren't going to — to spoil everything, are you, Mr. Williams, before Mr. Carter and — and Bill come back? Bill's an author, and I know this would give him lots of ideas ——"

"Bill? Morgan? They aren't coming back, kid. Carter's shoulder needed an Xray, and Morgan's leg showed infection, and so they're in Los Angeles in a

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hospital. Frisco was closer, but Morgan asked to be sent to Los, so they went together. No, they aren't coming back."

"Oh." Joe's voice was very faint and dull. "I think my father wants me, Mr. Williams. If you're through with us, I think we'll go — home."

"Oh, sure." Williams smiled negligently. "Good kid, to save us all the trouble of finding this. Send you something nice when I get back — oh, Bob! Might get a picture looking down ——"

Joe settled her hat on her head, spoke to Lobo and grasped the rope that made the fissure passable.

"Here, wait! Better let me help you, little girl. You might fall."

"Thank you," said Joe, "but I'm not the falling kind!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

WOODS MORGAN READS THE HEART OF BILL WOODS

WOODS MORGAN, fresh from a thoroughly authorish sojourn at Del Monte, where he managed to extract some real thrills and a narrow escape from a broken neck in the polo game there, walked once more into the path of destiny. On the surface of that afternoon he was strolling down to a street corner, meaning to catch the next downtown car, when he met the club president who begins this story. The club president wore a new gown and a becoming, fall hat and a new fur and she was on her way to the first real worthwhile meeting of the season.

"I know you are an answer to the prayer of a distracted woman, Mr. Morgan," she declared in her convincing way. "Here I was hoping and *praying* that something would happen to save my program this afternoon. You know Jarvis Middleton? Half an hour ago he telephoned that he can't possibly come; broke a rib — he *says* — and can't get around at all. I've heard before that he's tricky, that way. Well, that leaves me flat, of course. There'll be some good music, and a clever talk on kindergarten stories, and if you'll just show your face to the crowd and recite or read or do *anything* — seeing you are an answer to prayer?"

Woods looked down into her trustful, brown eyes and weakened.

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"Far be it from me to doubt the Lord's judgment," he said, "but are you sure you interpret the answer correctly? I've been out of the game for months, you know; haven't a rhyme in my head. I've a bad conscience over an unfilled contract, a limp I got in the desert ——"

"That's exactly what the good Lord was thinking of when he dropped me off at this corner, because I missed the Pico car! A limp, that you got in the desert — my word, what more could a club ask for than to hear all about it? There'll be some who know the desert and appreciate the adventure — come right along, it's the Lord's will. You can't go beyond that."

Should he? Woods hated to stand up and talk to a crowd of women, but — oh, well, the president had a way with her, and he went right along, his long legs accustoming themselves to her short, eager steps. They were late, and Woods was glad to see the president pounced upon and borne away to the platform before she could do more than send him an apologetic smile and nod toward a seat well up in front, close to the platform and the piano and a demure young woman whose back was turned toward him but whose wavy hair, with a live shine to it, gave him a sudden, homesick pang. He wished women would stop using brilliantine to make their hair look glossy. He wouldn't sit there at all. He would find himself a seat farther back, next the wall, where he needn't meet the seeking, smiling eyes of the women who recognized him

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with flutters of pleased excitement. So he sat by the wall and waited to be bored until such time as he could retaliate by boring others. What he would say when the time came, Woods didn't know. Give them a lot of hot air about sunsets or something — he'd be darned if he told how he got his limp! Why, if he were to tell ——

All through the opening formalities and the first piano number, Woods thought of the things he certainly would not tell to these women. About old Hank, and Barby and the adventure of the ring that failed to pan out a romance but went flat, and the cook who died of apoplexy from drinking moonshine on a hot day, and Marshall and his — no, no, he could *not* tell the only real story he had ever lived in his life. Funny — a writer seldom can. And Joe — he could still see the top of that girl's head, and her hair *was* like Joe's; had that same silky, alive look — Joe, and her funny, slangy talk and her dog. — A kid a man could just about worship, when she grew up and put on a bit of dignity and poise — by Jove, Joe had poise enough as it was! Come to think of it, he had never seen her flustered, all the time he was there.

A game kid, with a good deal of depth. He believed he'd take a run over there. He needed his typewriter, anyway, and he ought to make some arrangements about Hail and Farewell; couldn't leave those horses eating up the Marshall meadows without so much as a by-your-leave. Maybe Joe would like to have Hail. Well, he supposed she *would* be in school,

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by now. October — of course she would be back in school. — On second thoughts, Woods decided that he could write and make arrangements for the horses, and have his machine shipped to him ——

Woods came out of his abstraction with a start that made the women nearest him jump and look to see what had happened. What brought him back to his surroundings was a certain tone in a certain voice. The program had progressed to the point where the first speaker was beginning her talk, and it was that which sent a crimple up the back of Woods' neck, and gave his heart a pinch. It was the young woman with hair like Joe's, and she was saying:

"I called this talk, 'Literature for Little Tots' partly because I liked the jingle of it, but mostly because the little tots do need a literature of their own. You don't know it, I suppose, but those of us who teach the tots are still telling the same old jingly things that were invented to amuse King Tut's great grandmother when she was little. Or else we have to invent stories and jingles of our own. I've invented so many that sometimes I can't tell whether I'm an author or a kindergarten teacher; only I suppose I'm not an author, because ——"

Joe! Little Joe Marshall! It couldn't be — but it was. Standing there, secure in her subject, with the soft shine in her hair and the clear, terribly direct light in her eyes and with the soft curve from chin to chest — it was Joe, all right; no mistake. But what staggered Woods was the miracle of her growing up

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in a little over three months, from a slim, irrepressible tomboy of no more than fifteen at the most, to a young woman who could talk calmly of the problem of kindergarten teaching. Eighteen? Nineteen? Woods could only guess rather wildly and wonder at the thrill it gave him to see her, to listen to her voice.

If he had thought romantically of either girl, it was Barby who had figured intermittently in his thoughts. And that was queer, now he considered it. He had always been rather expecting to fall in love with Barby — and he had never quite come to the point of feeling more than a sentimental interest in her. Even that interest had been intrigued because of the episode of the ring, he now saw very clearly. And here was Joe — well, Woods suddenly found himself swept off his mental feet. He didn't know what to think about it. All he knew was that that funny, thrilly feeling hit him at certain tones in her voice, or when he looked particularly at her hair or the curve of her throat.

(You see, William Woods Morgan knew all about the various degrees of sentimental interest which a man may feel for a woman, but, except on the type-writer, he knew mighty little about love. Indeed, he had rather inclined to the belief that it was mostly an exaggerated form of describing a more or less mild sentiment.)

All I know is, Woods hadn't much of an idea what Joe talked about, or what he talked about later. He was so busy listening to Joe's voice and thinking about her that he lost her words or heard them vaguely.

The Heart of Bill Woods

And he was so busy wondering what Joe thought about seeing *him* there, that he talked with only a fraction of his mental self on the job. He must have talked rather well, however, since he was applauded frequently and smiled upon and thanked afterwards. He did not come to himself, really, with his whole mind and heart and soul in full accord, until he had manœuvered Joe into a corner behind the piano, with two cups of tea and a sandwich on each saucer, and a wonderfully understanding smile from the club president — who perhaps knew a thing or two. So the talk focused gradually to the point that interests us.

“Well, I really am eighteen past, just as I told Carter that time. It’s all in the way you tell the truth, Bill, that counts. And you see mother, — well, she hated to have me grow up, so on vacations I acted pretty much like a kid. Partly to please her and partly to please myself, because it’s in me and if it doesn’t come out during vacation, I expect I’d bust during the winter. A nice, efficient kindergarten teacher mustn’t use slang. So — maybe I’m kind of like daddy, too, in some ways. I just had to go off and have a real spree. And of course, when you came, it put a real kick in the part. I did enjoy you, Bill. And I’m going to go on calling you Bill — off in corners, like this — isn’t the president a dear? She’s standing guard over us like Lobo! Bless his old heart, how he does despise town!

“Oh, yes, we’re all in town. We left the ranch

Desert Brew

with Nelson and moved in, and daddy's a public accountant and just doing the most splendid come-back you ever saw. It's taken years off mother — the old dear. Oh, and shall I break the news about Barby? And how will you have it, Bill? Gently, or all at once and get it over?"

"Throw your grenade, Joe-girl. Is she married?"

Joe looked at him, smiled unexpectedly and leaned closer, one eye on the president's ample back that shielded them.

"Bill, honest, it's the arguses eye-wash! (That's a new one.) Barb knew you knew about the stunt she pulled at the beach, because she says she knows now that she made her little war-talk to you by mistake, and put that ring of hers right in your hand. It was perfectly thrilling, and after you gave her the ring and didn't let on, we both sort of expected you to fall in love with each other. You know, the romance of it and all — but love is a darned nuisance, isn't it? Barb couldn't get over Dick, somehow, and then you certainly didn't seem to fall for her so much, so it kind of dragged along and died out; on her part, I mean. She kept thinking that Dick didn't know she had returned his ring with scorn, and was probably running around in circles trying to find her. So when she came back with us, they got together and made it up, of course and — yes, they're married. I'm glad you take it so well."

"I'm mighty glad," said Bill, looking full at Joe, "because I ——"

The Heart of Bill Woods

"Oh, and Hank got off with a fine, and daddy paid that for him. And Bill, you ought to go over and see how they worked that moonshining. It would be perfectly adorable in a story. They had the storekeeper at Gold Center for an agent, and he sent all their stuff out to a mine in the hills, and they had one drift that broke through into another canyon, so the fellow that packed the stuff over to our side never showed up at that camp at all, but the foreman carried the stuff through this drift to the other canyon, and he loaded up from there and beat it. Isn't that a gorgeous plot for a story, Bill?"

"Maybe," said Bill absently. "I'm thinking of a love story now, Joe. The plot is, a writer fellow stumbles on to a ranch, and the girl there is — well, something like you, and he thinks she is just a kid, and all the while he's in love with her but doesn't realize ——"

"Oh, that reminds me, Bill. I've still got your typewriter, and if you'll go home with me, right now, mom and dad will be tickled pink, and you can stay for dinner and ——"

"Are you going to let me finish telling ——"

"Well — for goodness' sake, Bill, don't get a ring for her as big as Barby's. I think it's horrid taste. Hers always reminds me of a spotlight. I want one — er — I mean ——"

Bill smiled dizzily into her eyes.

"That dimple at the corner of your lips is going to get itself kissed, in about two seconds, Joe-girl — and they can call out the police patrol ——"

Desert Brew

The club president glanced over her shoulder, shook her head very, very gently and smiled.

"Run along home, children," she said softly, "and I'll fib for you and say you left long ago. That door behind you opens on a back hallway that will let you out on Grover Street. My blessings and thanks, to both of you. And Mr. Morgan, never dare to doubt the Lord's judgment again."

"Oh, don't you *love* her?" Joe exclaimed the moment their confused good-bys were finished and they were in the back hall that would let them out on Grover Street.

"Who?" William Woods Morgan had plainly forgotten all about the club president, and Grover Street, and everything else in the world except the flushed, smiling little person in the circle of his arms.

THE END

